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To better understand the five-member commission at the top of the Philadelphia School District, our student journalists sat down with one of its members.

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The young journalists who interviewed the Superintendent of ASPIRA Schools made learning more about teacher performance and student achievement their top priority.

EDICIÓN NO. 1

A S P I R A

SUMMER 2016

ZipCode

Mayor Kenney

“Don't be my age and regret things you didn't do.”



Left to Right: Cheryl Wiltshire, Gwynae Seegars, Rmani Justiniano, Mayor Kenney, Soad Awwad, Sonya Mendoza, Antonio Luna.

This is an experience that our young journalists will never forget. Cheryl Wiltshire was in charge of the intro and this is what she wrote:

We first prepared questions, which we later trimmed down to key questions on topics like technology, drug crime, jobs, housing, taxes, immigration and others which we were lucky enough to ask the mayor. Before attending the interview, we were all picked up by the ASPIRA van and driven downtown where we gathered a block away from the Mayor's office for a bite to eat and a review of how to introduce

ourselves. Then, we hurried across the street, headed upstairs and waited in the conference room. Every student journalist then confessed their nervousness. When Mayor Kenney walked in, I could see the uncertainty in my friend's faces, too. He greeted us all with a handshake, and the interview finally began. I'm happy to say that my very first interview as a journalist went great! Mayor Kenney addressed all of our questions with no hesitation and elaborated with really useful details. Overall, I believe that Jim Kenney will do a good job as our new Mayor.

What do you want to change about Philadelphia?

The poverty rate in Philadelphia is way too high. About 26% of our residents live in poverty, and 12-13% of them in what they call abject poverty, which are just terrible living conditions. Part of the problem has to do with the lack of education — early childhood education — and strong funding for schools from the state and the city. People who don't have a college education are struggling to find jobs that pay more than 10, 12 dollars an hour in order to raise their families. The third level

of residents are people who are currently incarcerated in our prison system. When they get out, we need to help them become productive, taxpaying citizens and stay out of jail.

If drug dealers know enough to be able to circulate drugs throughout the city, why don't they have jobs?

A lot of times, these young men — mostly young men but sometimes young women — don't have the parental guidance they should have growing up and go astray when they don't have that kind of family unit.

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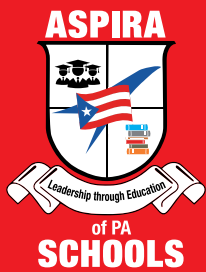
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Gold medals in track and field, basketball for special ed. students, and oh, a baseball championship!



ASPIRA serves more than just one community; our people come from a huge geographic area to develop their neighborhoods and work for growth together. This publication aims to add their voices to the city's dialogue, putting us on the map in our own unique Zipcode.



A S P I R A

ZipCode

As a Newspaper Club, we meet weekly with a group of eight students. We discuss how to ask interview questions, effective teamwork, the importance of journalistic investigation, and the issues that affect our audience and community. This includes discussions on Philadelphia education, city life and governance.

We formed great relationships with our young journalists and, above all, provided them with new and exciting human experiences through the interview processes; each interview brought this group of students to center city, in front of those who shape the way we live.

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STUDENTS

Lana Marcella Resuello
9th Grade / Olney

Given her passion for Olney's debate program, there's no arguing Lana's ability to think and speak well. "I don't care about people's gender, age or status in life. As long as you respect me, then I will do the same."

Cheryl Wiltshire
9th Grade / Olney

Cheryl enjoys singing, listening to music, and giving it her all in track and field. She's always wanted to write, and now she's using journalism to improve her skills while exploring new ideas.

Sonya Mendoza
7th Grade / Pantoja Charter

Sonya describes herself as having a mixed personality, which may explain why she loves meeting new people and has proved herself again and again to be a great listener and empathetic friend.

Gwynae Seegars
9th Grade / Olney

Social, outgoing, creative, high-energy and funny are all words one could use to sum up Gwynae.

Angel Arias
7th Grade / Cyber Charter

When asked, Angel described himself, and accurately we might add, as a "Happy person who tries to brighten people's days."

Michael Brady
7th Grade / Hostos

Michael's energy is matched only by his ambition, intelligence and creativity. He excels in science, but his equally great photography skills make him a valuable asset to our team.

Antonio Luna
9th Grade / Olney

Antonio is a pen and pencil artist — inspired heavily by street art and culture — a basketball player, and an avid follower of social issues like immigration.

Gianni Lopez
7th Grade / Hostos

Whether she's landing a dance move or a joke, Gianni Lopez is always keeping up an active, energetic life style.

Soad Awwad
8th Grade / Pantoja

Soad is a boxer who proves herself brave both inside and outside of the ring, never afraid to express her thoughts and humor through speech or journalistic writing.

Rmani Justiniano
6th Grade / Pantoja

A lover of reading and learning, Rmani seems more than ready for the professional world based on his fantastic ability to get along with his peers and keep things lighthearted and full of laughter.

PERSONNEL

Nathan Cross
Communications Coordinator/
Social Media Specialist

Nathan Cross is the Communications Coordinator and former Social Media Specialist for ASPIRA, Inc. of Pennsylvania. As a former advertising copywriter and graduate of the Temple University Advertising Program, he contributes to the visual areas of paper and edits student work.

Jason Fontana
ASPIRA Intern,
Temple University

Jason has the tendency of making things look easy. When he's not shredding the electric guitar or being awarded the Knudson Journalism and Latin American Studies Scholarship, he's doing big things for ZipCode or keeping immersed in his sociology and Spanish degrees at Temple.

Emma Restrepo
Former Communications
Coordinator

Emma conceived, planned and executed this project based similar models she observed in the Philadelphia School District, throughout Taller Puertorriqueño, and back in Bogota, Colombia. Talking about the first installment of the ZipCode, she stated, "Our first issue isn't without flaws, but this is really an experiment in creating a channel to represent our communities, which aren't always heard loudly enough. Communication and information are powerful tools for creating and unifying communities for better social and human development."

ABOUT ZIPCODE

The newspaper you are holding is the result of a long educational project undertaken by students of ASPIRA Schools. While we hope the content serves to inform and inspire the wide audience it's meant to reach, the finished product lives not on paper, but in the minds of the students who traveled new roads to bring it to you. When these talented young people stepped bravely into meeting rooms with Philadelphia decision-makers as important as Major Kenney or Farah Jimenez, they brought their own interview questions based on their desire to discover and share key points at the heart of the city's effort for progress in equality, education and overall quality of life. Their hands were not held, but remained true with each stroke of the pen. They learned the ethics, styles and etiquette of journalism while keeping the issues and topics closest to their communities at the center of their work. We owe them our deepest praise and gratitude, as this is the kind of commitment which enables citizens to bring about meaningful change in the places they live.



Four Words to Rule Your Life: “Decide to be Great”

The 44th Annual College Conference



Left to right: Miguel Vargas, Educational Advisor, ASPIRA Talent Search; Mei Chan, Youth Commissioner; Dominick Palma, Youth Commissioner to Councilman Brian J. O'Neill; Ricardo Calderon, Director of Philadelphia Youth Commission for the Mayor's Office of Public Engagement; Michael Sher, former COO, ASPIRA; Marta Sierra, Chief Programs Officer, ASPIRA.

Every year, Educational Talent Search, an initiative of ASPIRA Programs, connects students with peers, college representatives, and financial advisors to inspire interest in higher education while providing some of the resources and know-how needed to make attendance a reality. April of 2016 saw the 44th Annual College Conference draw 251 high school juniors under the theme, “My Future is Bright.”

“The participants were 48% Latino, followed closely in-numbers by African-Americans, and a small percentage of Caucasians and 3% from other backgrounds”, said Marta Sierra, ASPIRA Chief Programs Officer, to ASPIRA ZipCode. With fewer than 5% of American minorities able to access higher education, ASPIRA's commitment to this event follows its overall mission for greater educational achievement among underprivileged, young Philadelphians.

Ricardo Calderon, a long-time associate of ASPIRA of PA and now Director of Philadelphia Youth Commission for the Mayor's Office of Public Engagement, opened the conference with an emotional, personal address about his journey from humble beginnings to career prestige. He told the Audience:

“First off, I was born in a first-world, developed country. Secondly, I was lucky enough to have dedicated parents, even if we were a poor Dominican family living in New York. My parents left everything in the Dominican Republic in-search of a better future for us. Thirdly, I made

the decision to finish high school, and that eventually lead to a letter arriving at my house, which my grandmother opened. Now, even though my abuela did not understand English, she started to cry when she began putting the pieces together; it was an acceptance letter from Temple University. She told me that everything she had done for me and my family all made sense when she got that letter.”

While successes like this were part of his story, he didn't shy away from harsher realities of youth. “I wasted a lot of time partying, fooling around with girls” he said. He also recounted his failure to respond to a suicidal friend's “I love you” text message. While his friend's suicide attempt was unsuccessful, it provided the wake-up call Calderon said he needed to begin taking his education and career more seriously.

It was that experience, he claimed, which finally helped him understand the gravity his decisions had for himself and those around him. It was also around then that his grades began to slip, which resulted in a loss of financial aid from Temple. “I hated what I had become; I had a great education, great parents and I was throwing it away, I thought.”

“Yeah, it's true that some people achieve great success without going to college,” he said, “but college is a great opportunity to network, to meet people your age with your goals. I can definitely say that I'm here because I went to Temple.” He continued his story by detailing

some of his post-collegiate work, saying, “When I began with ASPIRA, we did amazing things. We provided needy people with coats during the winter. We fed people who needed it, people who had fallen on hard times.”

He closed on four words, which epitomized his message and the reason for the entire assembly: “Decide to be great. I fight every single day to be a better person, better son, better brother — better every day.” After the address, students were divided into subgroups to be instructed on college applications. Ronald Felder of the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA), an annual supporter of the conference, gave a thorough but digestible financial aid presentation.

Thanks to the support of more than 41 educational institutions, ASPIRA was once again able to provide the venue, transportation, lunch, and team of knowledgeable advisors to future young professionals coming from Olney Charter High School, Kensington, Franklin Learning Center, Penn Treaty and Mastery Charter School, among other schools.

ASPIRA's overall mission is to support community members “from cradle to career,” and this conference was a key step in doing so for hundreds of high school students. The organization would like to thank all attendees, partners and the hard-working people ASPIRA Educational Talent Search.

ASPIRA of PA's federally funded TRIO Educational Talent Search college preparation program helps students and their families explore post-secondary educational options, prepare for college (including SAT-preparation workshops), and find funding to support their post-secondary aspirations. This program is funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

Once an ASPIRANTE Always an ASPIRANTE

Miguel Concepcion
Coordinator,
Leadership Clubs

Years ago, our founder Dr. Antonia Pantoja created a leadership club program in New York to encourage social and political activism among local youth. When young people join our leadership clubs, they learn the ASPIRA process: AAA, Awareness, Analysis and Action. These principles provide them opportunities for self-direction and self-determination so that they can stretch to their full potential. “Once an ASPIRANTE, always an ASPIRANTE” is our way of saying that this sense of empowerment lasts a lifetime. Once a student becomes part of our family, doors are opened through which they can contribute to greater social and economic development. They become leaders who focus on positive change and gain the ability to put their skills and knowledge into practice for their families and the surrounding world.

It is precisely these types of young people we are looking to recruit and build through our clubs. If you are sixth grade or higher, we encourage you to join us.

“I joined the ASPIRA Club after a rough moment in my life. They gave me the strength I needed, and I am back again to doing positive things. I am learning to fix my mistakes. I'm thankful to ASPIRA for making me into the person I am today.”

—Andy Bermudez

Mayor Kenney

So, they're not prepared to go into school in kindergarten, first grade, and by the time they get to third grade, because they've never been in the classroom before, they're not reading at grade-level. By the time they get to seventh and eighth grade, they're acting up. And in ninth grade, they're dropping out. And once you drop out and begin to do some of the things that folks are doing on the street, you wind up either in the cemetery or in jail. It's really a life-long process of decisions and opportunities that folks don't have, but they can always be redeemed. No one's fallen that far to where they can't come back.

Why are gas prices and city taxes so high?

Gas is actually the lowest it's been in a while. I've seen it in New Jersey for as little as \$1.80/85 a gallon. It was close to 4 dollars a gallon a year or so ago. Taxes vary; you have federal taxes, state taxes, local taxes, school taxes. In Philadelphia, for example, real-estate taxes compared to the suburbs aren't as much, but we have a wage tax so people have to pay taxes on their wages, and if they live and work in the suburbs then they don't have to. No one likes to pay taxes, but without the revenue, we can't run the Police Department, the School District, we can't pick up your trash. We try to keep taxes as low as possible, but sometimes we have to raise them because we need money, and the state's not giving us what they used to and we have to end up making up the difference somewhere.

What did you study to get to what you are now?

I went to a parochial Catholic grade school in South Philadelphia called Our Lady of Mt Carmel. I went to St. Joseph's prep and then La Salle University where I studied political science, so I was really studying for what I'm doing now. I wanted to go to law school, but I got lazy and wound up not going. That's something I regret in my life. One of the pieces of advice I would give you is to don't just say you're going to do something, really go out and do it, even things that maybe you think are kind of weird or not cool. One of the things I wanted to do but never had the courage to do was be in the drama club. I was always interested in the stage and drama but I always thought it was kind of like ... not cool ... I really made a mistake. Don't be my age and regret things you didn't do. Try everything.

Do you think the Mexican people come to this country to do bad things?

No, absolutely not. They come for the same reason the Irish came, the same reason the Italians came, the same reason the Jews came, the same reason the Africans come. They want a better life, and people like Donald Trump and other ignorant people play on people's fears. The fact that you're bilingual is awesome. One of the things I suggest to you is always continue to progress in your English and do well there, but don't ever lose your Spanish, don't ever lose your Chinese or whatever, your Arabic or whatever else you speak. Don't lose that because it's part of your culture. When the Irish came, if you read Irish history, in the 1840's the British basically starved the Irish out of their country and two million people emigrated to the United States on ships coming across the Atlantic. Generally, half of those people died on the ship so they called them "coffin ships." When they arrived in Boston, New York, Philadelphia we just crawled off onto the dock. We had no papers. We were not documented. There are lots of other groups of people who came here; some of them had documents and some did not. The word "illegal alien" is disgusting. First of all, they're not illegal they're undocumented. Second of all, they're not aliens, they're human beings.

I wanted to kind of connect on this immigration thing. What is your take on racism, not just like by blacks or whites, but like male and female?

I think that racism is terribly prevalent in this country and I don't understand why people think the way they do about people of color. It's really sad and, I think it's still remnant of our slave days and there's this view that somehow people are inferior to other people which is absolutely not true. In Philadelphia the Irish at one point were considered non-white. They were considered people of color for whatever reason. I think that hopefully people your age and younger will grow up and get over the issue. I thought when President Obama got elected we had come a long way in getting through our race problems, but it got worse because the people that really hate black people were so angry that a black man was president that they came out and said and did things. What they used to do in private they were doing in public.



Newspaper club members discussing some of the city's issues with Mayor Kenney.

If you were president of the United States, what would you change?

I would change immigration. I would make it easier to come here. There's no reason in the world why people should have to wait years and years and years to become allowed to come to America and become citizens. We need to figure out a way for people who are here undocumented to become documented and to be able to come up out of the shadows and get a driver's license and get social security cards and do all the things that other Americans do while they're waiting for their citizenship. I think that immigration nationally has been a real problem and some of the ugliness that you hear in the presidential campaign, especially coming from the Republicans, is the really bad stuff. Some of the things Donald Trump says...drive me nuts. Rubio and Cruz...and I mean I don't know how you have the name Cruz and Rubio and you're anti-immigration. The issue that we are having in dealing with the Syrian refugees is a disgrace. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves for fighting the fact that people are in need in the world and we're not going to help them.

What are you planning to do with houses that aren't being used?

If somebody owns that house you just can't really go into it whether it's vacant or not and start owning it. So we have to figure out a way to get in—we have to figure out why the house is abandoned or vacant, whether it's owed taxes to the city, whether we can take it back, whether it's worth taking back because sometimes these houses are falling down and it's better to

knock them down. But if the house is in good shape and there's taxes owed on it we can move in and then have a sheriff's sale and go on and turn it over to somebody. But it's really hard because the property rights in the state and in the country are very strong and you have a hard time taking people's property even when they owe you money for taxes.

Can you provide driver's licenses to immigrants?

I can't give driver's licenses but we're working on a municipal ID card so that people can have a picture ID. The problem with the picture ID is that somehow it kind of identifies you as an undocumented resident. So it puts you somewhat in harm's way but if we distribute the municipal ID to both native born Americans, native born Philadelphians and foreign people then it would make them safer. The driver's license has to come from the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, they license drivers and this state is very conservative and not progressive, but I'm certainly in favor of both municipal ID's and driver's licenses for everybody.

Do you have a family?

Yeah. I was married for a long time. I'm separated from my wife. We were married about 28 years. She lives with our children. My son is 26 and my daughter is 21. My son is a probation officer with the courts; my daughter is in the Art Institute now but she is transferring to Temple.

What do you recommend for people who want to be mayors?

I think you really have to know about life and about people and neighborhoods and understand what the government does and is

supposed to do and see where there are mistakes and problems and fix them. You have to really learn how to write and writing is so, so important in any job you have. If you can't write well it's really going to limit your ability. So, practice your writing skills, it really is a very important skill to learn.

What motivated you to be the mayor of Philadelphia?

I started in 1978 as a volunteer for a state senator in South Philly when I was in college. I went on staff in 1980. I became chief-of-staff in '86. Then I ran in '91 for city council and I spent almost six, four-year terms in council. So I left in my 24th year on city council. It's part of my profession. It's what I've done for a long time and it seemed like the next logical step that if I wanted to help people at a larger scale, that I would become mayor and I was very successful and, god-willing, I won the election — the primary — and then I won the general.

Would you ever want to try to run for president?

No. No, I'm fifty-seven. If I stayed two terms I'll be sixty-five and it's not something you start doing when you're sixty-five. If you want to run for president you probably want to start sometime in your late thirties or forties.

Do you think that you could follow us on Instagram?

Sure I'd be happy to. Hold on. I don't do—I don't know if I do Instagram. Do I?

Outside personnel: We do.

Thanks Mayor! We had a great time!

A Closer Look at the School Reform Commission



We've heard many things about the School Reform Commission, but we don't necessarily understand its role. Young Journalists, Rmani Justiniano, Soad Awad and Sonya Mendoza from Pantoja Charter School, decided to seek answers. Farah Jimenez, School Reform Commissioner, answered this call.

Left to right: Sonya Mendoza, Farah Jimenez, Rmani Justiniano, Soad Awwad.

Is the School Reform Commission necessary?

It was created by former Mayor John Street, State Representative Dwight Evans, and at the time, Governor Tom Ridge. The state provides a lot of funding to the School District of Philadelphia. They pay for more than 50% of what it costs us to run our school system. So, because we're the most heavily subsidized district in the commonwealth, the state was dissatisfied with the quality of education provided in Philadelphia. The commissioners intended to focus on what is necessary in order to improve educational outcomes for students and reduce waste. We hope that we can address the financial challenges of the district, design how we want to teach in our schools, and then ultimately, put ourselves out of business and return oversight of the school district to an elected board or a board appointed by the mayor.

Why does education in Philadelphia need to be controlled from the outside?

If you were getting money from two different sources — let's say mom and dad — and mom was giving you 60% of your allowance, and dad was giving you 40% of your allowance, mom might feel some kind of way if she didn't have more of a say as a parent. Here, mom is the state, represented by the governor, and dad is the city, represented by the mayor. Since the state gives 60% of

our budget and the city gives 40% of our budget, our governor appoints more of the members of the School Reform Commission than does the city. But we're all appointed by our elected officials. I think if people are unhappy with how much funding comes to the district, we need to go back to mom and dad, or in this case the governor and the mayor, and ask for more. That way, we don't have to make such tough choices.

What do you think the risks would be if Philadelphia controlled its own education?

I don't know if there's a risk. I think the reason we moved away from that is that there were tough choices that needed be made and we needed the support of the state. If you're the state, you're not going to feel good about that about the city controlling the spending of your money. That's ultimately what happened; the state, because they're writing the bigger check, felt that they wanted to have more oversight of what's happening at the school district. Now, someday the city might write the bigger check, and then we should definitely control our own education. It's hard to go to the state and say, "We want more money from you, but we don't want you involved at all in how we make decisions."

Why the friction between public schools and charters? If you share a room, you'll get this. There was a point at which my sister and I shared

a room, and I just didn't like it. I am very neat, and she wasn't. I would put a line down the middle of the room and say, "You are not allowed to cross it." Now, imagine that my sister moved the line to claim more of the room and started adding furniture. I would have been mad, right? All of a sudden, it's like, "Hey! Wait I used to have..."

That's what happened for the School District. The district schools had 100% of the money and now they've got to share it with charters. We now have 130 district schools and 80 charter schools. Those passionate about the School District are really upset that charter schools are taking up more of the budget. Ultimately, adults should be deciding what's best for the kids; who's going to provide the best-quality education for students. But the adults do care, and that's where the fighting comes in.

What has been the biggest contribution by School Reform Commission to education in the city?

One of the things I am really proud of, and it involves the schools you attend, is that we have really improved the way that we evaluate charters. We have a very clear application process and way of evaluating the applications that we get. We hold our charter schools to very high standards in terms of how they perform, and we let them know whether they are meeting

those standards or falling short. When they're not, we let them know. Sometimes we unfortunately have to close charter schools for that reason.

If you were a parent, how would you ensure your kids receive a good education?

In Philadelphia we have what is called the School Performance Report. That helps us understand how they are doing in all these categories: climate, culture and academics, and then how they compare to other schools who are serving similar populations, geography or grade span.

Do you want to add something we didn't ask?

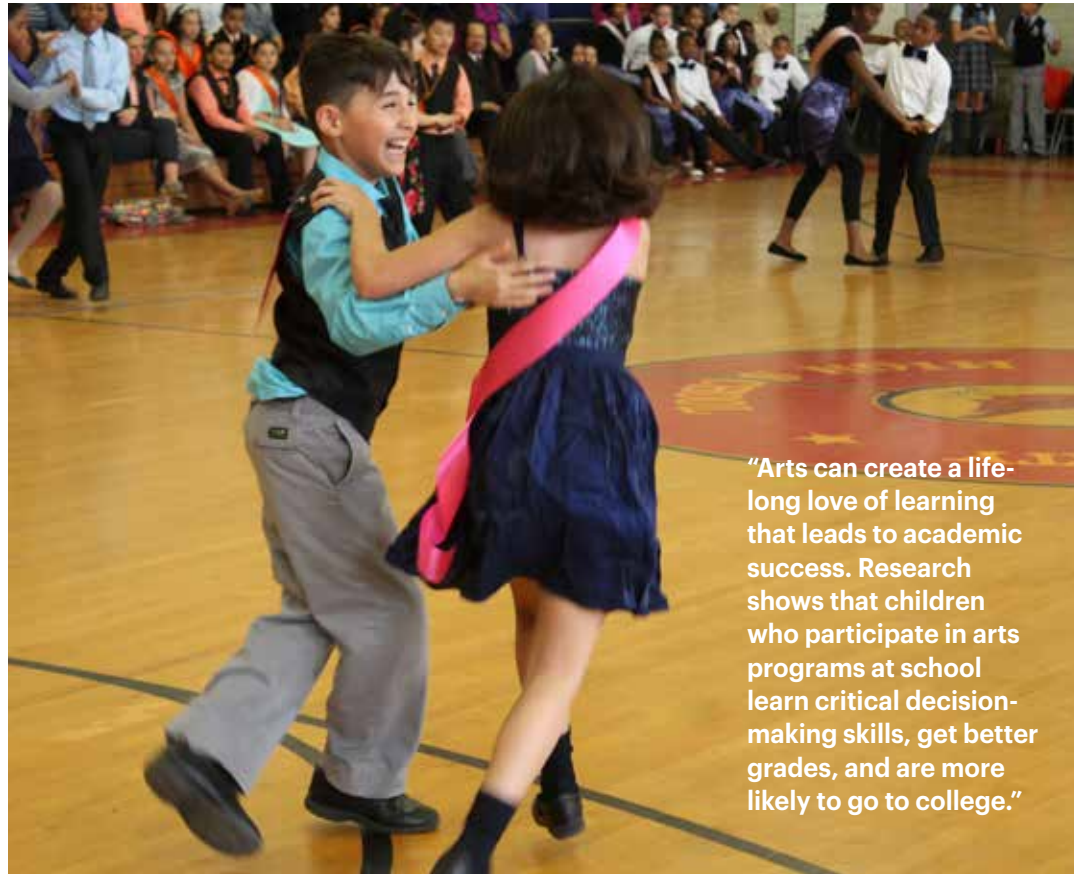
I would add that we have these School Reform Commission action meetings which include testimonies from young people like yourself and also parents who are sending their kids to schools they're either happy or unhappy with. We hear a lot from people who are unhappy which is useful for us to learn more about what we're doing right or wrong. So I would encourage you, and your classmates and your teachers, your parents to think about coming and just say something that's working in the district that they're happy with. And I would like to say to every single student in Philadelphia what my parents use to say to me, "It's your job to get a great education because once you get it, no one can take it away from you."



Ms. Jimenez is one of five SRC Commissioners and the Philadelphia Education Fund President and CEO. She has spent 13 years at the helm of Mt. Airy USA, a nonprofit community development corporation that led the transformation of Mt. Airy's Germantown Avenue into a thriving dining and retail destination.

How the Picasso Project's Investment in Art Education Benefits Philly Students

Thanks to the hard work of Art Director, Steve Lanciano, Hostos Charter School was recently awarded a grant from the Picasso Project to operate ballroom dancing classes! Picasso has enabled more than 34,000 children from 13 Philadelphia schools (both charters and district schools) to engage in artistic learning experiences in addition to their regular classes.



“Arts can create a life-long love of learning that leads to academic success. Research shows that children who participate in arts programs at school learn critical decision-making skills, get better grades, and are more likely to go to college.”

Hostos students have performed at the annual galas of Phila. Citizens for Children & Youth (PCCY) Musicopia, and the Cole Hamels foundation.

For those who don't know, the Picasso Project is an effort by Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) which awards grants anywhere from \$500 to \$5,000 to support teachers at local elementary, middle and high schools in their creation and operation of innovative, high-quality art projects. Picasso also advocates on the local and federal levels for increased arts education funding at area schools. Student journalists from *ASPIRA ZipCode* recently traveled to their offices to thank Linda Fernández, director and sole member of the Picasso Project, for the contribution and to learn more about the effort for greater inclusion in the arts city-wide.

Fernández may be the only the full-time Picasso Project staffer, but she is not alone. A large group of volunteers serves as an advisory committee, reviews the submitted grants, and works as liaisons between schools and the project.

When asked how the project manages representation of all the

arts, Linda told us, “When we are advertising for the grant, we reach out to the art education director at the school district, and we reach out to the music education director, and we ask them to send the opportunity far and wide,” she said, “that way, we know we're going to get a good variety and a good mix between visual art and music, theater and dance.”

After scoring the applicants, the Picasso team then makes sure that all arts are represented. The committee then parcels out the funding so it's evenly divided.

When asked how the project ensures that all minorities get the benefits of this initiative, Fernández told us, “We make sure that these grants are being given to schools in different neighborhoods. This year, our projects are all over the city.” They awarded thirteen grants this year, but they're spread out across different neighborhoods to serve students from all backgrounds and neighborhoods. “We ask, who

are the schools that we should be targeting? Who are the schools that really need this funding the most? So what I looked at were schools with the highest number of English language learners and schools with the highest numbers of IEP's (Individualized Education Plans). Those are the target schools,” she said.

Fernández uses geographic information systems to find the empty spaces in art education. Once these areas of need are identified, the Picasso Project visits neighborhoods and their libraries to host informational sessions so that local teachers can have easy access to information about the initiative.

Since its inception in 2002, Picasso mini-grants have provided over 34,000 children access to innovative arts projects. The Picasso Project awards grants of up to \$5,000 to schools annually to support projects in creative performance and digital arts.



“I've seen them learn about history, about civil rights — all through break dancing and hip-hop music — and other important skills.”

Linda Fernández
Picasso Project Director

Impacting Education in North Philadelphia

Andrea Gonzalez-Kirwin began as Superintendent of ASPIRA Schools in June of 2015. For our young journalists, Rmani Justiniano (Pantoja), Antonio Luna (Olney), and Michael Brady (Hostos), having a frank conversation about the schools, teachers and students was top priority.

Do you like where you are right now?

I love where I am right now. Especially when I walk through the schools and see what great opportunities we're offering to our students. I also see where there is some need for change in terms of providing even more opportunities on a day-to-day basis.

Would you make schoolwork harder or easier?

I would make it harder. When you get to college or go into the work place, it's not easy. The same applies to the military and the other avenues after high school. We want to get you into the stride of being able to handle challenging things.

How can you improve our education?

For me it means working directly with your principals to assure they have the tools needed to be highly effective and that we're selecting teachers who are in this to really make a difference. We're also providing them with professional development and all the tools they need to do an amazing job. If they don't, we hold them accountable. That means working with the MAP test, and that helps us because we get to see how you've grown from September until now in literacy and mathematics. In cases where maybe we haven't seen the growth we want, we go back and have the conversation with teachers to figure out what we can do better.

Would you make the process harder for teachers getting into schools?

We are looking to make it a more rigorous process. The interview process will be changing moving forward: the questions in the interview, the written portion and other pieces. We also ask that they do a demo lesson. I think it does need to become a little more difficult because we have great students, and I think you need to be a great individual in order to teach our kids.

Will you make the teachers that already got in go through the harder entrance process?



Left to right: Michael Brady, Andrea Gonzalez-Kirwin, Rmani Justiniano, Antonio Luna.

No, but we have a new teacher evaluation system. It's called Danielson. It's a much more rigorous system for evaluating teachers. Just like how students take tests, our teachers get evaluated by multiple people, throughout the year, who come in, watch them teach, and then give them a score.

Would you change the behavior in ASPIRA Schools, and what would you change?

It's different for us from school to school. Olney is unique because you're a high school and high school students have their own way of doing things. We added some counselors, some psychological services and now you have what are called behavioral specialists. They support students who are misbehaving for whatever reasons. And for your school (addressing Hostos student journalist) you have a director of school support and part of what he does is work directly with the teachers and parents to improve behavior. We're making progress in terms of having the supports in place for our schools and then moving that onto showcasing. People have a perception about what Olney used to be, and we've got to change their mindset.

Why do some guys come to school to play and do careless things?

I wish I knew the answer to that. There are multiple reasons. For some students, they don't necessarily come from the best home environment, and for some, I think it's just their personality and they haven't learned the importance of getting an education. Unfortunately, here in America, we often don't respect what an education can give a young person. I do find that some students, especially at the high school level, are a little silly and do

things that are inappropriate. What we are trying to do is work with those students and figure out how to help them get past some of that silliness.

Do you think that silliness affects other students?

I think it does. But even when you get into the work world, there are silly people you'll work with. But that teaches you to manage yourself in a situation where someone is doing something inappropriate. Do you join along? Do you ignore the person? How do we as individuals handle that? It begins to build your own character as a student and moving forward as an adult.

What would you say about the class helpers? Do you think one day they'll become our teachers, themselves?

I hope they will. So far, we've had two people that have done that. I actually was a classroom helper. At that time in Philadelphia, they called them "support service assistants." We called them "instructional assistants," and I did that for three years before I actually became a teacher. I think it helped me become a better teacher because there are certain things they don't necessarily teach you when you go to college.

Why do some teachers become substitutes?

There could be multiple reasons. One could be that they have young children so they can't dedicate all their time to teaching. For others, it's just what makes them happy. They'd much rather go into a building for a short amount of time versus doing it for an entire school year. For some, they may be working toward their teacher's certification. While they're getting the teacher's certification, they substitute teach to help them sharpen their skills.

OLNEY

One of Many Success Stories

Noemy Mejias is one of approximately 355 students who are graduating from Olney. This year, 224 students applied to a 2-year college, 169 applied to a 4-year college, 26 applied to trade schools, 4 to the military and 45 for OVR (low inc./SPED students). Olney has also been accepted as an SAT site. Excel and the Academy have 89 students graduating. Out of these, 88 applied to 2-year colleges and one to a 4-year college.



I have learned a lot of great things while attending Olney Charter High School (OCHS). This school has changed me as a person and made me look at life in a different way. There were certain things that I did not want to do before I came to Olney Charter. In the school, I have met amazing people that pushed me to want better for myself. The teachers and staff are so supportive and provide so much encouragement to me. If it weren't for them, I don't think I would be the person I am today. Before I enrolled in the school, I heard people say bad things about Olney High School. I started to think twice about attending OCHS. During my first few weeks of school, it was not what I expected. The school was such a positive environment and the students were not bad as I have previously heard from people. Then I realized that all the things that I have heard about Olney just turned out to be rumors. I never thought that teachers cared so much about your education.

I am now a Senior, and this year has been stressful for me. I have a lot of responsibilities I have to take on and get things done. Yet, I have had a lot of help from my teachers and counselors. I am glad that Olney teachers and staff are here to guide me through this journey because I wouldn't have done it by myself. They want to make sure that everyone has a plan after high school. The staff wants students to have careers and build a better life.

I know that no school is perfect, but as long as you talk to the right people and stay as positive as you can, you can always succeed. This is what I experienced and learned at Olney. I can honestly say that I am ready to take on adult responsibilities and that my time here has helped me grow into a mature young lady. I now know that coming here has done me well. Olney gave me more than an education. It gave me a chance to meet wonderful people that I get to call my friends and that were part of my growth.

Multi-Platinum Hip-Hop Producer, Amadeus, Visits Olney Charter

Gwynae Seegars made her love of music well-known in the very first work meeting between our student journalists. When producer Amadeus visited Olney, she jumped on the opportunity to ask for an interview. We had all read his website and the information included in his press release, but everything we learned from that point forward was based on the work of this young journalist.



Left to Right: Mike Daniels, Gwynae Seegars, Amadeus, Ariel Lajara

Gwynae sat nervously and laughed often in a corner of the audience close to the stage during her friendly conversation with Amadeus. He noted that he always felt a passion for music and had the fortunate opportunity to learn to play an instrument. "I felt that it was right and only right for me to take advantage of the opportunities that were given to me, and one of those opportunities was for me to learn how to play drums, and that was in fourth grade. I'm thirty-five years old now, and I've been playing drums professionally for about fifteen/sixteen years," Amadeus said to Gwynae as he casually found his seat.

We learned that he's produced for more than 60 artists, but even with all that fame and success, still values the opportunity to give back, especially to young people. "I've worked for J. Lo, Chris Brown, Trey Songz, Fifty-Cent, Tyga, Lil' Wayne, Keyshia Cole, Talib Kwali. In Philly, I've played with Freeway, Young Chris, Peedi Krakk, and El Squino. It's been a great career, and I've accomplished a lot so far, but I know there's more for me to do and being able to come out and speak to amazing students like yourself and just motivate you guys and push you guys to live your dreams like how I'm living mine."

The question that circled in Gwynae's mind from the first session of the Newspaper Club was, why do so many songs have cursing?

"That's a great question. I think, you know, when you're creating music as an artist it's kind of like you're painting your picture of who you are and what you've been through and what you've experienced and there's a lot of people that have been through some very challenging experiences and challenging movements in life and that's the best way to kind of get it out. I'm not saying that it's right. Obviously there's a time and a moment to use profanity, I obviously wouldn't want you using profanity, but it's a way of expression... So, you watch your mouth young lady."

How did you feel when you got to work with famous celebrities like Chris Brown and Trey Songz?

"Amazing. When you first meet these people it's like, "Wow, this is Trey Songz!" or "This is Chris Brown!" "This is Puff!" It's amazing because these are the people who we all admire. Meeting Chris Brown for the first time, J. Lo, Fifty-Cent was very exciting because these are people we admire, these are people that we listen to. For me to have the opportunity to work with them is amazing but, once you meet them and hang out with them for quite some time, you learn that there's no difference between you and Chris Brown or you and Nicki Minaj or you and Trey. There's no like super powers, it's just that they had a dream, they believed in it and they worked hard to see that come through. That's it. So, I'm going to ask you a question..."

"What's your dream," Amadeus asked Gwynae looking directly into her eyes. She covered her mouth, laughing and responding timidly, "To be a daycare provider."

"Now, you know that you can do that dream right? You can live that dream," Amadeus told her. "Yes, I do," she replied.

Amadeus sat back in his chair and told Gwynae, "Do this regardless of what anyone says, and you're going to get people that are going to doubt you. There are going to be people who will try and discourage you but you have to remain focused and know that it's what you love to do, it's what you're passionate about and there's no such thing as giving up no matter what. There's going to be some lonely days, some friends might not be there for you. These are experiences that I've had in pursuing my career and that's why I'm here today to kind of enlighten you and the rest of your colleagues on what it is that it takes to get to where you want to be. A lot of hard work, a lot of dedication, but you have something special: to be chosen to do this. You have a beautiful presence about you. You have a nice, beautiful smile. I can tell you're very respectful and those things will help you be the person that you are and that you'll turn into one day. So continue doing a great job, continue to work hard and believe and keep dreaming no matter what dreams do come true. I'm an example, right?"

PASOS

Ryan's Story: Our Tri-Lingual Student

Paula Schroeder
Principal, Pequeños Pasos

When Ryan first came to the preschool last year from China, his father was working hard in the US to bring he and his other family members over. He began attending our preschool last fall, and it wasn't always easy. Although the preschool has a dual-language learning program, Spanish and English, Ryan spoke and understood only Chinese.

It was clear he didn't always want to come to school. Imagine his frustration as a 3-year old trying to communicate to teachers who didn't speak his native language. This created a challenge for his teachers, Lead Teacher Mrs. Kristin Rivera and Assistant Teacher Ms. Mariel Santiago, to understand and be understood as well. But teachers have to find a way, and good teachers DO. Through visuals, signs and a gradual build-up of Spanish and English speech, Ryan's teachers were able to get through to Ryan in two new languages!



Ryan Lin and his father

When I dropped in for a casual observation of Ryan's room last winter, I happened to catch the Spanish literacy circle taught by Ms. Santiago. Ryan's hand went up, and he raised his voice to answer a question in Spanish! It was only a few words at first, but of course, that's how we begin any language journey. His teacher smiled and praised him, and he was excited to have answered and done so correctly no less!

When I returned to observe a formal lesson in math (English) in the spring, Ryan was speaking in English! Mrs. Rivera later told me that he had really improved, though his sentences were still short and had a few errors. This is progress! Through a lot of good teamwork, Ryan was quickly integrating two new languages and becoming tri-lingual!

When Ryan returned to us this year, we wondered how much of his new learning he had retained. His father told me that Ryan was using Spanish words not even he knew, in addition to surpassing him in English proficiency! I had to see for myself, and in the formal observation for English literacy last fall, Ryan raised his hand to answer every question and was now speaking in full sentences. Wow! His new Assistant Teacher, Ms. Minoshka Velez, told me that Ryan continued to make great progress and was always trying to communicate with them in both languages.

Here was one more example that through the proactive intervention, interaction and instruction of his family and three great teachers — and of course a strong curriculum — Ryan had truly become tri-lingual. This isn't the only story of its kind at Pasos; ALL of our classrooms have seen similar outcomes emerge. When you combine great staff with a high-quality program, family teamwork and tremendous expectations, a child's life can be hugely impacted at a very early age.

PASOS

Shooting for the Stars

Keystone STARS is an early childhood education initiative through the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL). For the past three years, Pequeños Pasos has participated in this program which uses learning standards, staff training, assistance, resources and other supports as measures of quality for greater achievement. Its goal is “to improve, support and recognize the continuous quality improvement efforts of early learning programs in Pennsylvania.”

The Performance Standards are grouped into four levels which serve the foundation for the program: STARS 1, 2, 3 and 4. Each level increases in quality of expectation and is built upon the previous level, incorporating research-based practices to promote high-quality learning environments and student success. The standards measure quality and training of staff, communication with parents, the learning program itself, leadership, and program management.

We quickly enrolled in the STARS program after applying for our DPW license and settling in our current location. ASPIRA, the Pasos staff and our partners collaborated to improve facilities, the learning program, and many other areas. Right off the bat, we began working hard to earn our first star — which was followed quickly by our second. By last year, we were aiming for 4 STARS. With assistance from the United Way Success by 6 grant, our staff came together to reach STAR 4 early this year! This top achievement came only seven months after submitting our ASPIRA Framework Preschool Curriculum to the State and earning approval with 100% alignment! The journey does not stop here, however, as we will work to maintain the highest quality rating with your continued support.

ASPIRA ZipCode talked briefly with two wonderful women of Professional Development Dimensions (PDD) who recently supported Pequeños Pasos to make this dream a reality: Koren L. Clark and Neshamah Maillard.



Left to Right: Neshamah Maillard, Manager, PDD; Paula Schroeder, Principal, Pequeños Pasos; Koren L. Clark, Quality Advisor, PDD

“It was not us. It was a collaborative effort on the part of all staff. From the moment I stepped into Pasos, I felt very welcome. Thank you to the United Way for their Success by 6 initiative.”

Neshamah Maillard,
Manager, PDD

“We supported the process and really enjoyed the experience of working with Paula and her staff, but at the end of the day, it was their hard work and commitment. Sometimes parents don’t understand what high-quality education means. It means that their children will be more successful in high school, going into college, having paid jobs... This shows that ASPIRA and Pasos are providing high-quality education for the children and their families.”

Koren L. Clark,
Quality Advisor, PDD

STETSON

Building a Special Place in Our Society



Left to Right Back Row: Ms. Alicea, Kyle G., William C., Middle Row: Nelson H., Christian T., Daina D. Front Row: Jayson S. The current number of students in the Special Ed. program at Stetson is 158.

I began with ASPIRA the first year they obtained Stetson Charter. It was my first year as a teacher and my favorite year to date. That’s because it was so amazing to see first-hand the changes that were happening there. I, myself, graduated from Stetson in 1999, before getting my high school diploma from Edison in 2003. As a product of the neighborhood, I know the adversity that these students face on a daily basis, and I am proud to be part of the change that’s taking place in this community.

The project first started last year with our visit to Olney’s Café Exceptional, operated by the school’s Low Inc. Special Ed. students, followed by a visit to Stetson by our friends from Olney. It was a one-of-a-kind experience which gave us a lot to think about moving forward, as our program is substantially smaller. Being the only Special Ed. teacher makes it difficult to plan something as elaborate, so we did not pursue it last year. I figured we could definitely do it this year on a smaller scale, so I then began brainstorming with students!

Together with occupational therapist Ashley Seiver, I devised a lesson on creating a survey, so students could gather information about the teachers’ lunch preferences. Ashley also coached students on the finer points of interviewing, such as asking questions, greeting subjects, and thanking them for their time.

We then moved on to choosing food options and creating shopping lists based on some of our recipes. Once students had come up with the name “Viola” for the café, we were in business!

Students are involved in every step of the process, from voting on the week’s recipe, to creating order forms, shopping, preparing the food, checking order statuses, making deliveries and more. They even rotate roles based on what we’re selling that day. All proceeds of this activity will be used to support 8th class trip dues for those who are unable to pay them.

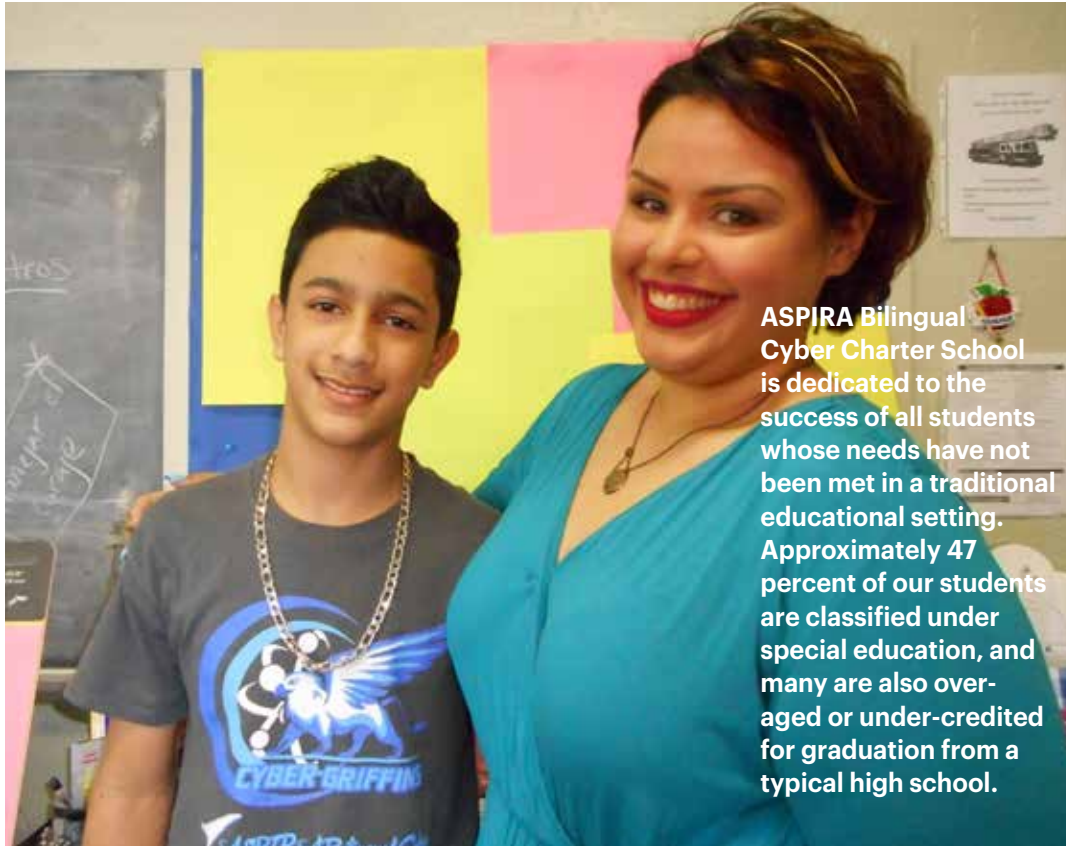
Skills like reading, implementing recipes, creating a shopping list, navigating a grocery store, checking out at a cash register and food safety practices all add to the overall experience of these young people. Additionally, this project gives them the opportunity to explore the building, visit other classrooms, and meet new peers, as they are a self-contained class and don’t always get to.

Not everyone is college material, but everyone has something to offer society. I know they will leave Stetson with skills that supersede the expectations of the world outside.

Cynthia Alicea received her Associates Degree in Elementary/Special Education from Esperanza College before earning a Bachelor’s at Eastern University via Esperanza. Afterwards, she continued her education with Grand Canyon University, earning a Masters in Secondary Ed. She is excited to be currently pursuing an additional Masters in Administration at Gwynedd Mercy University.

CYBER

Bajo la misma Luna



Left to right: Bryan Santos and Mariangeli Castro.

Encontrar historias significativas en nuestras escuelas no es tarea difícil; cada edificio, cada piso, cada salón tiene algo que contar. La siguiente es la historia de un estudiante, Bryan Santos, y una maestra, Mariangeli Castro, quienes comparten la valentía y la fortaleza de haberse mudado a Philadelphia en búsqueda de un mejor futuro. ¿El punto de encuentro? Nuestra Escuela Chárter Bilingüe Cyber.

Luego de cinco años de no ver a su mamá, Bryan con sólo 9, decidió hacer maletas y venirse al “norte” para cumplir el sueño de la reunificación, además de abrazar y ser abrazado, derecho fundamental de todo ser humano. Bryan le contó a ZipCode que cuando por fin tuvo cerca a su mamá, lloró. “No podía creerlo”. Y no es para menos; ella se fue cuando él tenía 4 años y aunque con sus abuelos tenía una familia, ya no aguantaba más esa ausencia.

Mariangeli, primero periodista y luego profesora certificada de Puerto Rico, fue una de los 30 maestros entrevistados y contratados en 2015 para trabajar en las distintas escuelas administradas por ASPIRA Inc. de PA.

Los primeros meses no fueron fáciles para ninguno de los dos. Bryan se perdía en la ciudad porque “todas las calles me parecían iguales”, y en la escuela también porque “todo es en inglés” y en su pueblo Buenavista de Honduras nadie lo habla. A Mariangeli la ciudad no le gustó, nadie la culpa, no hay nada que se compare con las playas de la Isla del Encanto.

A ninguno de los dos se les veía contento por los corredores del tercer piso de lo que comúnmente llamamos “Campus”. Sin embargo, como todo en esta vida, el tiempo se hizo cargo de mejorar la situación. Mariangeli encontró colegas y restaurantes puertorriqueños, además de la familia que todos sabemos es Cyber. Y Bryan se dio cuenta que sus compañeros eran todos bilingües y comenzó a hacer amigos.

El Bryan que Mariangeli veía en el salón de clases a principio de año, no se compara con el de ahora. Este nuevo Bryan habla en inglés y no ha olvidado el español. Dice que se siente agradecido porque sabe que son pocos los jóvenes que tienen la oportunidad de estar estudiando en

este país. Extraña a sus abuelos pero no extraña a sus maestros porque cuando el no entendía y preguntaba, le daban una reprimenda.

Marangeli, aunque en un principio le dolió dejar su carrera de periodismo por las difíciles condiciones de la Isla, ha encontrado en la enseñanza otra manera de cambiar el mundo a través de la información y la comunicación. Y se siente conforme y feliz con ello. Ella recomienda experiencias de este tipo porque la soledad que ha experimentado le ha enseñado nuevas facetas de su personalidad, se ha confrontado con sus miedos y sus ausencias, y lo que es aún mejor, en la distancia han mejorado sus relaciones con la familia.

Bryan no se cambia por nadie. No hay un solo día en el que no reciba un abrazo, y además por triplicado porque ahora tiene dos hermanas menores. Está aprendiendo un nuevo idioma, tiene nuevos amigos, ya reconoce las calles y dice que lo único que se necesita es “echarle ganas”.

ASPIRA Bilingual Cyber Charter School is dedicated to the success of all students whose needs have not been met in a traditional educational setting. Approximately 47 percent of our students are classified under special education, and many are also over-aged or under-credited for graduation from a typical high school.

Modern Challenges for the Free Library of Philadelphia

Siobhan Reardon, originally from Yonkers, NY, always aspired to be a leader. When the directorship of the Free Library of Philadelphia opened up in 2008, she “wanted this job really badly,” and she got it. As a matter of fact, she is the first woman at its helm. Cheryl Wise, Lana Reseullo and Gwynae Seegars, our young journalist from Olney Charter High School, interviewed her about her work. The three girls were taken with the kindness of the library staff, as well as the architecture, services — and the cafeteria — they were happy to find in the building! They first met Reardon in a quiet conference room where the interview followed the introductions.



Left to right: Cheryl Wiltshire, Gwynae Seegars, Siobhan Reardon, Lana Marcella.

What has given you the inspiration to serve the library for eight years? Philadelphia is a city that needs libraries, however, things are changing with the way libraries do business. That means we must introduce more technology, have good relations with our schools and be a part of the education process for young people and older adults.

What are some of the challenges you face as director of the Free Library? Finding funding for the work we do. Our budget was cut severely in 2008, and in order to augment some of the cut, we have a fundraising foundation of private individuals. It’s also hard to recruit people due to the librarian wages we are forced to offer: some of the lowest nationally. We have been able to recruit some excellent people, but it could be done better if we could offer higher salaries.

What impact do you hope to have on the youth of Philadelphia through the programs offered by the Free Library? I would love for the Free Library to truly be considered a partner of education and for the youth to think that this is a cool place to come. We hope to create more programs that suit the interests of the youth, things like technology and creativity. We also want to aid students in continuing their education, as nearly 50% of students who start high school do not end up graduating. So we hope to encourage those students to finish their education and gain success.

What advantages are there to reading books in the library over just using technology? Using physical books allows you to interact with the text by making notes and marking up the book. Children are also able to see the book, turn the pages and carry it around to create a more tangible relationship with the words and the text as a whole. For children, having a book in their hands can really enforce relationships with learning because “reading is love,” and technology can diminish some of these aspects. Technology can create an isolated environment that’s less conducive to thought and knowledge.

What do you think is the function of libraries in the modern generation? We focus on the relationships people can have with knowledge with the library as a space for thought and sharing of ideas. Libraries, as a meeting place for the community, can inspire civic engagement. Neighborhoods want their libraries so their people can have conversations about today’s issues, like policing of schools and poverty. Adult library use may be decreasing, but I think that libraries, as a resource for parents, will continue to be prevalent.

Finding Your Purpose The Story of ASPIRANTE, Romer Acosta

Romer Acosta is a student ambassador for Temple's Fox School of Business, IT Director for the Society for Human Resources Management, the Advertising Chair of the Esencia Latina dance group, and a former intern for the National Department of Transportation in Washington D.C. But before everything, he was a student at Olney Charter High School.



The list of achievements above is a shortened one, and yet Romer's story is one of labor, not luck. As the grandson of first-generation immigrants from the Dominican Republic, he learned at an early age that no member of his family has ever attended college in the U.S. and that people from his background generally achieve lower levels of education than Americans from other demographics.

He knew how much earning a college degree would mean to his family and for the career he'd eventually want. These challenges ignited him to become valedictorian of his class at Olney — the first class to graduate under ASPIRA Schools' management — overcome the academic hurdles he faced in college, gain experience through countless clubs and student groups, and poise himself for success in nearly every way.

Romer has explored many career paths through his classes, programs and extra-curricular involvement. Today, he's most interested in pursuing any educative roles that his business degree may open up. Why education? Because Romer was inspired by the help and mentorship shown to him throughout his youth by teachers, counselors and program directors like Venita DeLaRosa-Ortiz: his close friend and advisor for years.

When asked what piece of advice he would give to a young person on their journey, he summed up his story in just three words: "Find your purpose."

GO ASPIRA Schools!

ASPIRA Student Journalists, Guianni and Michael held interviews with ASPIRA Schools Athletic Directors Mike Andolina (Olney) and John Seman (Stetson, Pantoja, Cyber, Hostos) for an overview of the biggest news in sports.



BASEBALL

Olney boys are the 2016 Public League Baseball Champions! This is their first championship in nearly 50 years, and a BIG congratulation goes out to the team and coaches Dan Karlyn and Justin Daberkoe for making us so proud. Stetson also showed up big for ASPIRA Schools, competing in the MPAA semifinals before losing to First Philadelphia by just two runs. Hostos had a great season as well, missing the playoffs by just one game.

SOFTBALL

Stetson's and Pantoja's teams both competed in the semifinals of the MPAA playoffs, and Olney's Kimberly Suchite was awarded the Nathan Garfinkle Scholarship for her outstanding contributions as a community member and student-athlete.

BASKETBALL

The OCHS Low Incidence Basketball League brought together low inc. students on June 3rd for a day of competitive play. The LIBI was created to give all students the chance to have fun on the court.

FOOTBALL

Mike McKeen, former offensive line coach at Olney, has stepped up as head coach for the team.



TRACK AND FIELD

Pantoja girls won gold in the mile and bronze in the 4x100 relay. Hostos girls won bronze in the mile. Both Stetson boys and girls won silver in the 4x400, and the boys won bronze in the 4x100.

