Making the Grade 2019

Another view of education in the Berkshires and Southern Vermont

A special publication of The Berkshire Eagle, Bennington Banner, Manchester Journal and Brattleboro Reformer, Thursday, February 28, 2019
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Making the Grade 2019
A closer look ...

Richmond Consolidated School nurse Cristina Lenfest starts her day helping Matthew Peck with a splinter.

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BY JENN SMITH

Our local schools are bustling ecosystems fueled by local investments. We drive by school buildings every day. Some of us stop to drop students off or pick them up. We might visit a few times a year to see a basketball game or school play, or every so often find ourselves voting or attending a meeting in a school gymnasium, cafeteria or library.

But unless you’re an educator or student, few of us know what goes on inside schools on a daily basis, or consider how much schools have changed since we were students.

For this year’s Making the Grade, we invite you to take a closer look and bear witness to these timeless roles, changes, new challenges and trends:

Page 5: Hear from professionals and kids about what, to them, makes a good teacher.
Page 9: Spend a day in the life of school nurse Cristina Lenfest.
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Page 23: Take a breather and learn about classrooms that are integrating mindfulness and movement alongside science, reading and mathematics.
Page 28: Take a walk in the shoes of Steven Vitt at a college designed to support students with learning disabilities.
Page 33: Find out how college admissions counselors make their decisions to admit students.
Page 36: Listen to a conversation between an English as a second language teacher Louise Celebi, and her student, Anya Valdospinos.

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AWARD-WINNING SCHOLARS

Avalon Lebenthal ’19 and Daniel Tian ’19 were two of 300 semifinalists selected in January from a pool of 1,964 entrants, in the nation’s most prestigious pre-college science talent search competition, the Regeneron STS. Each partnered with professional research scientists (from Princeton, SUNY-Albany, and Union) who served as mentors and performed research in Berkshire’s own lab. Eleven semifinalists have been selected in the last ten years from Berkshire’s cutting-edge Advanced Math/Science Research program.

ACCOMPLISHED ARTISTS

This January, Christina Tao ’21 (violin), Elizabeth Nutting ’19 (violin), Kevin Rhee ’21 (cello), Angela Ansah ‘21 (flute), Maia Tolentino ’21 (soprano), and Giang Le ’20 (alto) were each selected for the Massachusetts Music Educators Association’s Western District Music Festival Concert at UMass Amherst. Musicians are chosen from a pool of candidates from over 40 schools and organizations and audition for each phase of the festival, which includes performances by a concert band, a 200-voice chorus, and full orchestra.

EXCEPTIONAL ATHLETES

Justin Donawa ’15 was selected by the Columbus Crew SC as a third-round draft pick in the 2019 Major League Soccer SuperDraft in January. He is the third Berkshire Bear drafted by the MLS. Donawa was a key member of three of Berkshire’s New England Class A Championship soccer teams and was a 2014 Boys High School All-American. He went on to Dartmouth where he helped lead the Big Green to Ivy League titles in 2015, ’16, and ’17. In his native Bermuda, he is a member of the Men’s National Team.

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What makes a good teacher?

Vermont educators, kids discuss the characteristics of a quality educator

By Tiffany Tan and Bob Audette

When students aren’t looking at their phones, whispering to their classmates or asking in succession to go to the bathroom, you know there might be a good teacher heading the class. The teacher is doing something right by keeping kids’ full attention.

Both Vermont and Massachusetts have teacher evaluation systems that involve multiple steps, supervisors, detailed metrics and rubrics. But not all signs of good teaching are tangible or can be summarized by a brief description listed in a box.

“A good teacher is one who is able to make this happen regardless of any difficulties in their own personal life. A good teacher is able to make this happen in spite of the troubles in the world that we need to be prepared for. A good teacher enjoys the enthusiasm of youth so much that it overcomes all difficult parts of the job.”

Teachers need to be not only academically skilled but they also need to have very good interpersonal skills, enabling them to connect with students, parents, fellow teachers and the local community.

“It really does take the community to raise the kid,” said Patty Lea, a sixth-grade teacher at Mettawee Community School in West Pawlett, Vt., part of the Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union.

Teaching the whole child

In decades past, it was enough for teachers to be experts in their subject areas; now, they need to also know how to support students emotionally and socially, said Tim Payne, principal at Mount Anthony Union Middle School in Bennington, Vt.

During classroom observations, Payne said, supervisors evaluate teachers based on the content of their lessons, the kinds of questions they ask and the type of feedback they give students, as well as the class environment shaped by their students’ behavior.

Scotty Tabachnick, principal of NewBrook Elementary in Newfane, Vt., says a great teacher takes the time to know, love and support their students.

“They challenge every student and ensure individual progress,” he said.

“Great teachers use formative assessment data to plan their differentiated lessons and flexible groupings. They collaborate with and borrow from other great teachers. Great teachers inspire their students and their peers.”

“My teacher helps me to understand math problems. She understands me and the problems I might have too,” said Riley Taylor, a sixth-grader at NewBrook. That teacher is Joyce VanPamelen, aka “Miss VP,” to her students.

Among the qualities that the Man...
From students at Bellows Falls Central Elementary School:

“‘A great teacher is kind, nice, helpful, a good listener and cares about her students,' said Natalie, second grade.

“‘What makes a great teacher is someone who is helpful and fun and creative,' said Chloe, second grade.

“‘A great teacher knows kids’ names and lets kids learn alone,' said Jazmyne, second grade.

“A great teacher is agreeable, respectful, responsible, kind and listens to everybody,” said Aiden, second grade.

“My teachers are kind to their students and do not yell at their students. They make sure that their students have fun too,” said Jordyn, second grade.

“You can tell a teacher anything. My teacher cries when she reads books that are sad. My teacher teaches me a lot of things. She make me laugh,” said Aaryanna, third grade.

“Being kind is helping us if we are struggling, letting us go on field trips and encouraging us to do our hardest,” said Zachary, third grade.

From first-grade students in Brattleboro:

“Extra help when I need it,”

“‘Talks and doesn’t yell,'”

“All the hugs you give us.

“Keeping us safe.”

“They are honest.”

“They are patient.”

“We like laughing with our teachers.”

Mountain Anthony Union Middle School English teacher James Gallen teaches his students in Bennington, Vt.

HOBBY PATEZNSKI | BERNINGER BANNER

“Good teachers never give up on students. They come back day after day working to ensure they are always doing the best that they can for their students.”

— Lyle Holiday, Windham Southeast Supervisory Union superintendent

From administrators:

“A great teacher doesn’t need to be an extrovert who always is ‘rah, rah’ with kids. Rather a great teacher is someone that kids can sense is ‘for real’ and has a genuine caring for their students, believes in them and will hold them accountable because they truly believe in their students’ potential,” said John Gagnon, principal of Guilford Central School.

“A good teacher is one who lives by the habits of heart and mind that we work to instill in our students,” said Jon Sessions, assistant principal at Academy School in Brattleboro.

“When a student finds trust and comfort with their teacher, they feel cared for at school. … [Good teachers] believe all children can learn and who take the time to challenge each student at his/her own level so the student’s academic and social needs are being met, is providing a quality educational experience for all students,” said Keith Lyman, principal at Brattleboro Area Middle School.

“A good teacher is someone who is reflective, responsive and collaborative. The combination sets the stage for continuous growth. If we’re reflective: we are constantly considering our performance and the experiences of our students and evaluating what works and what doesn’t. If we’re responsive: then we are always ready and willing to reshape our practice based on our reflections. If we’re collaborative: then we will learn from our peers reflections and apply it to our own practice, while also being comfortable and willing to share our own learning and experiences,” said Deb Kardane, a teacher at Academy School in Brattleboro.
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A day in the life of a school nurse

A school’s main caregiver has you covered, from boo-boos to bad days

Richmond Consolidated School nurse, Cristina Lenfest teaches a health class on sex education.

BY KRISTIN PALPINI

RICHMOND, Mass. — Matthew Peck is in tears at the Richmond Consolidated School nurse’s office on the morning of Tuesday, Feb. 5; he has a splinter in his big toe. The slim protrusion isn’t in very deep. School nurse Cristina Lenfest could easily remove it — if Matthew would just let her try again.

How he got it is a mystery, but that doesn’t matter at the moment. The boy, a first grader, is afraid removing the splinter will hurt.

He gave her one shot at it, but Lenfest was not able to fully grip the splinter.

Matthew goes back to class, but returns in an hour not feeling well. He’s back again just before lunch, this time, to get the splinter out.

In some cynical circles, Matthew might be called a “frequent flyer,” someone who uses a service more often than others. But treating Matthew was one of Lenfest’s favorite parts of the day. She likes being able to provide comfort to students whatever their needs may be. The role of the school nurse has expanded beyond simply applying Band-Aids to supporting a child’s total health, the physical and the emotional.

“Students that come to me repeatedly, whether or not they’re in physi-
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Richmond Consolidated School nurse Cristina Lenfest starts her day helping Matthew Peck with a splinter and saying the morning Pledge of Allegiance.
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PRE-SCHOOL AND
KINDERGARTEN NOTICES

From the nurse's notebook

For a closer look at the job, The Eagle spent the day with Richmond Consolidated School nurse, Cristina Lenfest, on Tuesday, Feb. 5, 2019. Here's what happened:

8:30 a.m. School begins, Matthew, a boy with a splinter in his foot, seeks help, but refuses to let the nurse take the splinter out.
8:32 a.m. Matthew and Lenfest say “The Pledge of Allegiance” together, part of the schoolwide morning routine.
8:40 a.m. Student comes in with a cough, treated with kindness and sent back to class.
9:15 a.m. Talk with the fourth-grade classroom and teacher, Mr. Arace, about food allergies and how to be a PAL, “Protect A Life.”
9:53 a.m. Coffee break.
10-11:30 a.m. Student with potentially contagious condition is sent home.
- Matthew is back, feeling unwell, but returns to class with a temperature of 99.1.
- Student Pearl isn’t feeling well. Treated with kindness and sent back to class.
- Student Lily has a stomachache. Treated with kindness and sent back to class.
- Student Riley has a knee scrape and is feeling sad. Hugs and a little Disney music later, she is sent back to class.
- Two students come in with cold/flu-like symptoms. Treated with kindness and sent back to class.
- A student has sore legs. Treated with kindness and sent back to class.

11:30 a.m. Matthew returns to get the splinter out, but is unwilling to sit through the extraction.
11:45 a.m. Meeting with paraprofessional, guidance counselor and two members of the faculty to discuss how the school can best serve a specific student suffering with anxiety.
12:00 p.m. Student has a headache. Treated with kindness and sent back to class.
12:02 p.m. With the janitor out for the day, the nurse wipes the lunchroom tables down to sanitize to reduce the risk of contaminants for students with severe allergies as well as the spread of cold and flu germs.

For more information on how to contact School nurse, Cristina Lenfest, call 243-9715.

Kristin Palpini is a reporter with The Berkshire Eagle. She can be reached at kpalpini@berkshireeagle.com, @kristinpalpini on Twitter, 413-629-4621.

LEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PRE-SCHOOL AND
KINDERGARTEN NOTICES

KINDERGARTEN REGISTRATION
FOR SEPTEMBER 2019

Kindergarten Workshop: Wednesday, March 13 at 6:30 p.m.
in the LES Cafeteria for parents of enrolling kindergarten students to explain registration process.

Kindergarten Registration: Wednesday, April 3
Call 243-0336 prior to April 3 for information and to obtain a Registration Packet.
Children now attending Kindergarten at Lee Elementary do not need to register for Grade 1.
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INCOMING KINDERGARTEN SCREENING
Kindergarten Screening: Wednesday, April 24 and Thursday, April 25. Appointments are necessary and will be given at Kindergarten Registration on April 3.

KINDERGARTEN ORIENTATION
Kindergarten Orientation: Thursday, May 16
More information will be provided at the March 13 workshop.

THREE AND FOUR-YEAR OLD PRE-SCHOOL SCREENING
Must be 3 or 4 years on or before October 1.
Wednesday, April 10, Thursday, April 11 & Friday, April 12.
Appointment is necessary for screening which is required for potential peer models in the integrated preschool program. Call 243-9715 for information and to schedule an appointment.

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——— Compiled by Cristina Lenfest and Kristin Palpini

——— Compiled by Cristina Lenfest and Kristin Palpini
Want to become a school nurse? Here’s what it takes.

By KriStin PalPinI
THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

In rural communities, the school nurse is often a critical part of a child’s health care. While larger school districts may have school physicians and physician assistants, schools in Berkshire County and Southern Vermont often have a single nurse serving a school, and, in some cases, a whole school district.

Demand for school nurses is growing, but the supply of readily available nurses is not. Nurses in the region oversee a student population of 275-419 students each. But, nationwide, school nurses often care for more than 1,000 students each — a symptom of the lack of school nurses available — according to the National Education Association.

The average local school nurse is somewhere between 48 and 56 years old and female, according to the National Association of School Nurses’ 2015 data, the most recent information available.

Locally, school nurses can earn an annual salary of $27,000-$55,000, according to payscale.com, a salary comparison website.

The requirements for becoming a school nurse are similar in Massachusetts and Vermont: have a bachelor’s in nursing science, be a registered nurse, get a license from the state to work in schools, and have certifications that include CPR administration and the treatment of allergies.

In Massachusetts, just like teachers, school nurse candidates have to pass the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure in the subject areas of communication and literacy. Massachusetts school nurses also rely on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the state Department of Public Health among other organizations to keep them up-to-date on medical advancements.

Vermont has established a hierarchy of school nurses that include consultants and “leaders” at the local, regional and state levels. Nurse leaders are responsible for educating school nurses and providing staff support.

For more information on school nurse careers visit Massachusetts School Nurse Organization at msnos.org or the Vermont State School Nurses Association at vssna.org
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State-mandated school mergers and talk of consolidation stir interest, controversy in the region

BY HEATHER BELLOW, PATRICIA LEBORUP, CHRIS MAYS, JENN SMITH

Merging. Consolidating. Collaborating. For school districts across the region between the Berkshires and Southern Vermont, these concepts come with great potential, pose challenges, and in some instances will not be a choice for local districts.

Vermont school officials are grappling with the aftermath of approving the 2015 law known as Act 46. Back then, the state offered so-called tax incentives for districts to merge by 2019 in a cost-savings campaign. Then, back in November 2018, the state Board of Education ordered dozens of districts to merge less populated districts into single pre-K-12 districts by July 1, and dissolve school boards to create new centralized bodies of governance. In response, multiple municipal lawsuits have since been filed alleging that to mandate schools to merge is unconstitutional.

In the Berkshires, while there are no state mandates to do so, several districts have started sharing administrators and services, and are devising operational cost-sharing plans. An independent entity called the Berkshire County Education Task Force is working on a feasibility study for consolidating the county’s 17 public school district into a single-district model. Even more, the towns of Clarksburg, Mass. and Stamford, Vt. are exploring an interstate merger in this region.

To get a broader sense of what these proposals and changes mean for their respective communities, reporters took to their neighborhoods to talk with residents and school officials to gauge the public perceptions. Here’s what they’ve learned.

Brattleboro, Vt.

Compiled by Chris Mays

Bill Anton, 48, superintendent of Windham Central Supervisory Union, has helped navigate Act 46 mergers of school districts in Dover and Wardsboro — which is now the River Valleys Unified School District — and districts in Brookline, Newfane, Jamaica and Townshend, collectively now known as West River Modified Union Education District. Both districts become operational July 1 and their mergers were approved by voters.

Q: How has the consolidation of boards in your supervisory union affected your work?

ANTON: It has created greater opportunities for regional conversations about the future of education for our communities. It has put great stress on our business office in creating new entities, providing thoughtful information about the budgeting process, and delivering timely information for boards to consider. Consolidation of boards has created the need for greater systematic thinking and focus on the needs of all of our students. ... The consolidation of boards has created the need to reflect on board member roles and responsibilities.

Q: How have students been affected by the merger?

NEWTON: As a senior here, I personally haven’t felt any effects here. ... From what I hear, the middle schools tend to be more nervous about how they will interact with one another. I also heard, from middle schools and high schools and even some faculty, there might be even more division between the middle school and high school. I know parents of young kids might feel uncomfortable about close interaction between the age ranges.

LANDERS: From what I heard from middle schools mostly is they don’t know if the sixth graders are necessarily ready to come up to the middle school level. I guess it depends on how they prepare their kids in elementary school. When they do it the first year, there’s going to be some kinks
to work out because the sixth graders aren’t going to be ready. The elementary schools will need to figure out how they can prepare them more to be at a higher level.

LeeAnn Jillson, 35, of Brookline, has a son who will be entering kindergarten at NewBrook Elementary next year. She was appointed in September to the NewBrook School Board that will become inactive July 1. As a parent, she regularly attends West River Modified Union Education District board meetings.

Q: How has the consolidation of boards in your district affected the schools?

JILLSON: I think it is too soon to tell. There have been a lot of changes made in our district. Moving sixth grade from the elementary schools to Leland & Gray and [allowing elementary] school choice [within the district] could have a big impact.

Q: What are the pros?

JILLSON: The biggest pro I have seen is that people are paying attention to what is going on in our local schools. I also like the idea of being able to expand the school meals plan that is currently at NewBrook to all the schools in the district. It is an extra expense that taxpayers certainly don’t want to think of right now but my hope is that it will pay for itself in the future.

Q: Cons?

JILLSON: While it may not be a direct result of the consolidation the budget is a definite con. We are reaching a point where the community won’t be able to absorb the increases much longer. Currently on the proposed budget, maintenance is set to be deferred again as a way to keep the budget down but that won’t work forever. We need to find a way to attract families to our district. We have an aging population in our region and a lot of them are on fixed income. We need some new blood to help revitalize our district.

Another potential con is school choice further reducing class sizes at different schools. Under the articles of agreement for our district, a school can’t be closed unless that town votes to close it. At what point is the enrollment considered too low to be viable? I am against closing any of our small schools but at the same time how can the taxpayers be asked to fund a school with only 20 or so students? Thankfully, our numbers aren’t that low but without an increase in school aged children in our district I feel that problem is inevitable.

Edith Slowe, 80, and Richard Slowe, 84, live in Vernon and have grandchildren attending local schools. Their district has not voluntarily merged or been forced to by the Vermont State Board of Education.

Q: What are your thoughts on Act 46?

RICHARD: It’s gotta be consolidated. It’s not equitable for a small town that doesn’t have money. So I think consolidation in the long run would
be good. The times have changed. The insurance, faculty and people — it's very expensive. It's a different time and small towns can't afford it.

EDITH: While Gov. [Phil] Scott doesn't want to raise property taxes, they say, “We're not going to raise your property taxes but we are reassessing everybody's home.” So what used to be property taxes but we are reassessing every other year. It's almost like a smoke and mirrors deal.

RICHARD: It's expensive to live in this state.

EDITH: I think the reason they don't like this Act 46 is because they will lose control. The school board will lose control of what happens at the school.

Bennington, Vt.

Compiled by Patricia LaBoeuf
Bennington Banner

Leon Johnson is the North Bennington representative on the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union board and Mount Anthony Union School District Board member. The SVSU, he pointed out, has already merged and consolidated a lot of its efforts, including busing and food service.

Q: How do you feel about efforts for regionalization/consolidation as outlined by Act 46?

JOHNSON: It's a benefit to being able to have the school districts have a consolidated effort. We save money, we save time and we save efficiency.

He said the big issue involves equity. Some people want their districts to remain the way they are, but they also want grant money to go to them. “That's the biggest thing. I think, is to make sure that equity is actually done fair,” Johnson said.

Heather Hassett co-owns Bringing You Vermont on Main Street in Bennington, along with her husband.

Q: How do you feel about efforts for regionalization/consolidation, specifically Act 46?

HASSETT: I think we're in a difficult position in this state. ... From an emotional standpoint, I struggle with regionalization [because each school is unique].

Sharon Stepp weighed in on the subject as she headed to check out at Willy's Variety in Bennington one weekday afternoon. Although she's raising a grandson who doesn't attend SVSU schools, Stepp said she has kept up with the news surrounding the Act 46 merger.

Q: How do you feel about efforts for regionalization/consolidation, specifically Act 46?

STEPP: “Cost-wise, they have to do it. It's not optional.”

Stepp said she understands that small school communities love their way of doing things, and don't want to change.

Q: Will this help or hurt the community?

STEPP: “I think it's got to do something,” she said. Stepp added that she'd like her taxes to go down, as she's retired. In theory, a merger could do that — but she's not sure.

“You've got to look at the whole budget,” she said.

Kimberly Tenner is the assistant principal of Molly Stark Elementary School, part of the Bennington School District, which has been ordered to merge with the Pownal, Shaftsbury and Woodford school districts to create a unified union elementary school district. She said she's in favor of consolidation. And not because of money.

Q: How do you feel about the merger efforts in this area, specifically under Act 46?

A: “For me, it's about being a cohesive group,” she said.

Tenner said she understands the need to save money, and how others feel differently about merging. “I also understand some people feel that they're going to [lose] some of the autonomy that they have with a smaller supervisory union, or a smaller district,” she said.

Q: How might this merger affect Molly Stark Elementary School?

TENNER: We're in a large district as is. ... I just don't see it making a huge difference. I think we're already a cohesive group.

Christopher Mayer, a senior at Mount Anthony Union High School, said he believes Act 46 was formed with positive intent.

Q: How do you feel about the Act 46 merger?

A: “I believe it has good merit,” he said, adding that he thinks elemen-
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Primary school students should probably be okay with the merger.

He said he is concerned about the effect of the merger on teachers.

“He are they going to stay employed? Or are we going to lose some good teachers?”

If a merger results in more students per teacher, he said, that could mean less one-on-one time.

“It all depends on how we execute it,” he said.

Micheal Nolan, a third-grade teacher at Molly Stark Elementary School, has been working for the Bennington district for about 17 years. He said it’s important to put the students' best interests first. With a merger, he said, he understands it would make it easier to

better allocate funds for services like special and education.

Q: How do you feel about the planned merger of Bennington, Pownal, Shaftsbury and Woodford districts?

A: Under Act 46, the new district could form magnet schools with focuses on things like the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics or the arts, he said. Or, there could be different buildings for different grade levels.

“And it could also avoid closing smaller schools that way, as well,” he said.

Some teachers, he said, are concerned about how merging to form a new district might affect teachers’ seniority. But most aren’t too concerned about it, he said. And neither is he.

Southern Berkshire County, Mass.

Compiled by Heather Bellow
The Berkshire Eagle

Q: What do you think about the idea of local schools merging and consolidating services?

A: “I understand about economies of scale and mergers. But to be way out in a huge building?” she said, of the large, isolated school buildings brought about by regionalization in the last 50 years.

Jonathan Rosen, 52, of Great Barrington, has two children, 13 and 17, who attend schools in the Berkshire Hills Regional School District. Both boys had previously attended two smaller schools in a neighboring district, both in New Marlborough, and in the South Egremont schoolhouse.

Q: What do you think about the idea of local schools merging and consolidating services?

A: Rosen said that as long as there is still the “important alternative” of the small town schools for younger children, he would support a consolidation effort of, say, the Mt. Everett Regional High School and Berkshire Hills’ campuses.

While the matter of maintaining a
that set up building the level of trust.

A: “All of those experiments in doing so you can have a conversation about it,” he said of the collaborations in a region with dropping populations, particularly of the young, which chips away at enrollment needed to keep a school district running strong financially.

“What may be the real catalyst for this is when some enrollments drop in some communities to where they have to have a partner,” he said.

Carly Terranova, 17, of Great Barrington, is a senior at Monument Mountain Regional High School. She points to the social benefits of a consolidation effort, since students from Monument Mountain often socialize with students from nearby Mount Everett High in Sheffield.

Q: What do you think are the benefits of consolidation?

A: “I feel that more people would know each other and that would be a better environment,” she said, adding that there might be an adjustment.

Some of this, she said, is specific to the atmosphere at her school.

“At Monument, people isolate into their own groups a bit, though everyone is friendly for the most part.”

Q: Do you think school pride gets lost with consolidation?

A: Terranova, who races for the Monument Ski Team, said that the issue of school pride might not be much of an issue, particularly with sports. Already, students from neighboring districts are on the Monument football team together, and the Mount Everett hockey team is composed of students from Monument and other schools, she said.

In Terranova’s eyes, consolidation might even improve Monument’s school spirit.

“School spirit isn’t the best at Monument,” she said.

Under a shared cost and services plan, Peter Dillon now serves as the superintendent of both Berkshire Hills Regional School District and the two districts of Shaker Mountain School Union.

Q: What do you think about the idea of local schools merging and consolidating services?

A: “There are always informal conversations about consolidation, but no actual real talks,” Dillon said, noting that districts are doing everything but that by sharing services and collaborating in other ways. He says all these little steps pave the way for an eventual physical merger.

“But it’s something that makes some folks quite nervous,” he said.

Q: Why?

A: “All of those experiments in doing that set up building the level of trust

Q: What are the benefits to talking about consolidation?

A: Resistance to actually, physically, merging schools tends to hinge on two things: transportation and school identity and pride, he said, quoting a former committee member who sat in talks years ago.

“She said, “You know it’s going nowhere when they bring up the mascot in the first meeting.”” Bamon recalled. “Everyone’s worried about identity instead of maybe focusing on what’s best five to 10 years from now on the education of the student.”

Distances in a rural county are another concern.

“Transportation is big,” Bamon said. “The two farthest points in Southern Berkshire [County] can be a very long bus ride.”

Yet, this worry is mostly confined to elementary students.

“Parents and educators have always felt they needed to stay in their communities,” he said.

Q: What are the challenges to merging?

A: The benefits are clear, he noted, and include more robust budgets and class offerings. “One reason we take school choice students is to fill up classes with empty seats, and get revenue from that,” he said of the state’s program that allows a student to go to school outside their home district.

Overall, Bamon said he’s for consolidation, under the right conditions.

“In the appropriate circumstance where both districts and towns are losing population, where geography allows transportation of students in a fashion that doesn’t inhibit education, and where we can show a cost savings and not affect education,” he said.
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One deep breath at a time

How mindfulness is becoming a growing strategy for managing stress and trauma in local schools

By Jenn Smith

There’s a quiet revolution happening in local classrooms. It starts with closed eyes, one long, deep breath, followed by another.

Through practice, this movement can lead to a more open heart, a sense of calm, and a clear head. It’s called mindfulness, and it’s being utilized in schools from the Berkshire hills of Western Massachusetts to the Green Mountains of Southern Vermont. It’s a tool that’s so accessible and simple to use, even elementary school students can achieve it.

In Debra Alibozek’s kindergarten classroom at the Berkshires’ Richmond Consolidated School, about a dozen children gather in a circle each morning and each afternoon, allowing their typically energetic bodies to settle gently into a seated position on the multicolored carpet that covers nearly half of the classroom floor.

Alibozek, better known in the school as “Mrs. A,” and fellow teacher Pamela MacDonald, aka “Mrs. Mac,” take turns leading mindfulness routines for their students.

Sometimes, the class members each hold out a palm to represent a starfish, a shape that they trace with a pointer finger from the op-
Instead of sending a disruptive or stressed out student out of the classroom, Lee Elementary School classrooms offer children a “cool down corner,” above, where they can go for a few minutes to practice mindful exercises and retrain their thoughts to focus on learning.

Carter Crisp, below, a kindergartner at Richmond Consolidated School focuses his mind during the start of the day in Debra Alibozek’s classroom.

Minding the mind

Elements of mindfulness have been employed for centuries in personal and spiritual practices, such as yoga and meditation. But Michele Rivers Murphy, a Pittsfield-based research associate and consultant for the Center for Educational Improvement, says the modern applications of mindfulness are considered powerful tools for mental and physical health and well-being for people at any age.

“Nobody is immune to stress and trauma,” she said.

The acts of breathing and being aware of one’s senses and surroundings, Rivers Murphy said, are non-denominational.

“Mindfulness is about having an intentional awareness in the present moment,” she said.

This, said Rivers Murphy, can be accompanied by cultivated breathing exercises, thoughts of gratitude, even movements ranging from stretching to hiking.

Rivers Murphy co-authored the new book, “Mindfulness Practices: Cultivating Heart Centered Communities Where Students Focus and Flourish,” with CEI Executive Director Christine Mason and Yvette Jackson of Teachers College and the National Urban Alliance.

The collaborators say that the big reason mindfulness exercises are now being implemented in schools is because of the role mindfulness has been demonstrated to play in supporting healthy brain function. Better brain function leads to better cognitive responses and subsequently helps to address the rise of trauma and stress among school-aged children and their teachers.

“One of the things we teach teachers is that unless you understand the way your brain works, you can’t help [your students] or yourself,” Rivers Murphy said.

When a person experiences stress, certain parts of the brain trigger the adrenal glands to produce more of the hormone cortisol as part of the body’s natural stress response. Chronic stress results in higher hormone levels. Sustained periods of elevated cortisol and adrenaline levels can wreak havoc on the brains and bodies of students and teachers; it can also affect the function of a school, from student performance to the expense of absences.

The good news is, stress can be managed.

Modern mindfulness applications have been studied since the 1960s and ’70s, thanks to leaders in the field like Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biologist and founding executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

Kabat-Zinn developed and has trained others — including educator and licensed mental health counselor Deborah “Deb” Lewis — in the widely used Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction technique for coping, pain and stress management.

Lewis developed and has been operating the Mindful Paths Stress Management Center in Manchester, Vt., since 1997. She recently received grant funding through the health-focused nonprofit RiseVT to teach mindfulness strategies to more than 100 students and teachers across Molly Stark Elementary School in Bennington and at Pownal Elementary School.

“Mindfulness is paying attention on purpose, in this moment, with non-judgment. There’s not a cultural belief system to learn or anything,” Lewis said.

“When someone is mindful,” she said, “they’re not acting in a distracted way. They’ve got eye contact with you, they’re excited, they’re listening to you and have good answers coming back because they’re giving you their attention.”

In schools, she said, the benefits of having mindful students is obvious.

“They’re paying attention to [the teacher] or paying attention to the project they’re doing,” said Lewis. “They’re not concentrating on negative thoughts to themselves like, ‘You’re a stupid artist.’ They’re confident in themselves.”
A tool for empowerment

When students — or anyone for that matter — are cared for, have their basic needs met, and are feeling relaxed and confident, their potential for success becomes limitless.

In her “Mindfulness Practices” book, Rivers Murphy uses Lee Elementary School in the Berkshires as a case study for the positive gains a whole school can make by adopting this practice.

A few years ago, Principal Kate Retzel noticed an increase in red flags at the school from previous years: Students had more frequent and longer spans of absences, more kids were prone to outbursts, and teachers were calling out sick more frequently. At the same time, more students were experiencing challenges in their home lives, from domestic violence to food insecurity to disruption in family income due to job loss or parental separation.

In a clinical sense, more children in the school were experiencing collectively what the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention call Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs. As children were acting out in response to these experiences, the climate in the school became more toxic, leading to things like low morale and both staff and students missing school due to fatigued minds and stressed bodies.

So, Retzel thought, if negative thoughts and feelings could be transferred between people in the school, what about positive ones?

The principal began learning about what’s known as a “trauma-informed” response to students exhibiting disruptive, destructive or distracted behaviors. The trauma-informed approach means that teachers, staff and administrators learn to look for the signs and symptoms of traumatic experiences in children and respond in a way that makes the student feel safe, validated and empowered with opportunities to change his or her behaviors and feelings.

Additionally, Retzel connected with Rivers Murphy to learn more about mindfulness and a “heart-centered” approach to teaching and learning through compassion.

“We chose compassion as our focus area and let teachers make it their own, in a way,” Retzel said. “We were looking to tap back into the heart-centered side of why we became teachers.”

Rivers Murphy worked with Lee Elementary members during the 2016-17 academic year to conduct a yearlong pilot in implementing mindfulness practices in the school while...
tracking progress with a newly developed School Compassionate Culture Analytical Tool For Educators, or S-CCATE. At the same time Rivers Murphy and her CEI colleagues conducted other pilots in schools in other states across the country.

Throughout Lee Elementary, teachers used tactics like positive behavior modeling, facilitated play, giving students “brain breaks” during the day to stretch and dance, and more to help redirect negative thoughts and behaviors among students, and to give students constructive outlets for their emotions.

For students who can’t verbalize their emotions, teachers carry around a visual mood card so kids can point to the expression which most resembles their own feelings.

Third-grade teacher Ruth LeCompte keeps a basket of toys and objects that can be held, squeezed or bent when students feel stressed. She also crafted a plush character named “Washington Worrywart,” whose mouth can be unzipped so that students can give it their worries, little notes written on pieces of paper with instructions that read: “Write down your hopes and fears. I will hold them safely for you while you continue your day. I will share your worries with your teacher. Take deep breaths and relax.”

In Michele Pulieri’s fifth-grade class, they use an app to project yoga exercises onto a SMART Board before settling down to learn math.

It may take five minutes out of her class period but, Pulieri said, “It’s a miracle what happens and what I get back from students when they’re focused.”

Rivers Murphy also touted the returns on investment in mindfulness routines.

“We’ve found that you get 10 minutes back for every two minutes you put in,” she said. “After you learn, it’s free. It’s a free life tool.”

In the sixth grade, students’ re-kindled sense of compassion currently manifests into a student-run food pantry and food security initiative led by Lee educators Kelly DeVarennes, Sonya Daly and Nancy Hanson. The CEI even awarded the group a $500 grant to seed the project.

“I don’t think if you don’t have something you should be judged,” said sixth-grader Brooke Sargent.

Her classmate, Omari Smith, said kids and families who are struggling “need to know that there are people out there that want to help you.”

**Forward thinking**

“Kids need to know they matter, that they’re important, and that there are pockets of greatness everywhere in the world,” Rivers Murphy said.

While simple in theory, the mindset of mindfulness is also something that needs to be taught and reinforced, she said.

Currently mindfulness teaching and practices tend to occur more at the elementary school and middle school levels versus high school and college levels.

Rivers Murphy said the CEI is looking to work with other institutions to discuss what could be implemented in higher education through teacher training curriculum and practice on campus.

Lewis, of Mindful Paths Stress Management & Yoga in Manchester, Vt., said the benefits of mindfulness become better when the whole family is involved.

“In the elementary schools, I encourage [the kids] to go home and tell their parents about three-part breaths, or to go to Google and learn about it together,” she said.

“It’s so important for parents to get this message along with their children,” Lewis continued. “Everyone can use this mental calm and awareness in their lives.”

Jenn Smith is a reporter with The Berkshire Eagle. She can be reached at jsmith@berkshireeagle.com, @JennSmith_Ink on Twitter or 413-496-6239.

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"I’m not afraid to talk about my experiences"

Sure, Steven Vitt has struggled with the effects of his ADHD and NVLD, but it’s not holding him back at Landmark College.

By Kristopher Radder and Jenn Smith

Steven Vitt, 26, of Brighton, Mass., looks like and works just as hard as any other college student. In some ways, he’s also worked harder.

On May 17, 2014, he graduated as a member of the Phi Theta Kappa honor society with his associate of arts degree in liberal studies from Landmark College in Putney, Vt.

He then transferred to another college but it wasn’t an ideal fit. Now he’s back at Landmark, where he gets the extra support he needs to be successful. The college, which has 475 students, is billed as being exclusively for those with diagnosed learning disabilities, attention disorders or autism. Vitt is diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, and a non-verbal learning disorder, or NVLD, which can affect a person’s organizational, social, even motor skills.

“People have brains that may operate in some ways a little bit different than other people’s but it doesn’t make them a deficient person it just makes them unique, and I think that uniqueness is important in a lot of ways,” said Vitt. “It strengthens my learning to be around people that aren’t exactly like me.”

Vitt’s currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree in liberal studies with a minor in education.

“I’m enjoying my life. I’m enjoying education,” he said. “I think it’s important for kids or teenagers who are going through a tough time in school, whether it’s high school or college, to just understand that … you may be having a tough time now but that’s not necessarily going to be the rest of your life,” said Vitt. “There are people that are gonna want to help you, and with that help you’re going to be able to succeed.”

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KRISTOPHER RADDER — BRATTLEBORO REFORMER

A day in the life (Clockwise from top):

Steven Vitt, a student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and non-verbal learning disorder at Landmark College, helps put away books at the school's library as part of his work-study program.

Vitt talks with Dr. Peg Alden before the start of the diversity psychology class.

Vitt goes through the lunch line.

Vitt sets up while Jim Baucom hands out a worksheet for an educational psychology class.

Vitt hangs up some inspirational sayings on the walls of the resident assistant's office after a meeting.
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To accept or deny? That is the question.

Area college admissions counselors share their insights into the college application process.

BY BENJAMIN CASSIDY

On a Thursday afternoon in late January, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts Associate Director of Admission Kayla Hollins was sitting next to stacks of student welcome materials in a Smith House conference room. A horde of applicants would soon receive their acceptance letters from the North Adams institution, a “P.S.” sticky note with praise from one of the school’s admissions counselors attached to each.

For the counselors at the public liberal arts college, this personal touch is the final flourish of an intensive application review process, which involves roughly 10 weeks of recruitment trips and 400 prospective student reviews per counselor, as well as evaluations of every application during the review committee meetings that begin in late November and can last until August.

“Every application that gets sent gets reviewed on a few different levels,” Hollins said of MCLA’s method.

Technology has revolutionized the college application process. With colleges switching to paperless applications in recent years after decades of receiving mail-in packages, that approach might provoke some skepticism from students assuming that their applications simply get electronically sorted. The rise of the Common Application, aka Common App, which allows students to complete one application to be submitted to multiple member schools and has contributed to record application numbers at some institutions, hasn’t helped quell students’ fears of getting lost in the digital shuffle, either.

Applicants, however, can take solace in knowing that MCLA’s human-based review method isn’t an unusual one. Seventeen miles north in Bennington, Vt., Bennington College also uses individual and committee reviews to determine its first-year classes, and those decisions are not made lightly.

“It can be difficult to sit with,” Bennington College Assistant Director of Admissions Logan Shearer said of...
College Essays: MCLA students recall their essay topics

GILLIAN JONES — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

In her college admissions essay, MCLA sophomore Lauren Kelley of Balston Spa, N.Y. wrote about losing her grandmother, who lived with her family, to lung cancer, within three months of a diagnosis, and how that impacted her. "Expect the unexpected," is what she said she learned from the experience.

In her college admissions essay, MCLA junior Sarah Mitchell, 32, of Richmond, Mass., a non-traditional student with a 12 year old daughter, said she wrote about wanting to pursue education to be a better resource to her clients. Mitchell is a certified financial planner who is studying business at MCLA.

In his essay MCLA freshman Daniel Buchanan of Cohoes, N.Y. wrote about how he started a special needs baseball league in his hometown when he was a freshman in high school. "I wanted to give everyone a chance to play sports because that is my life," said Buchanan who plays baseball for MCLA.

MCLA senior Amanda Larzazs of Southbridge, Mass., wrote about how music had impacted her life, especially in her senior year of high school. During that time, she was the student director of the high school band which gave her a lot of confidence. A performing arts major, Larzazs plays five instruments including two types of clarinet, saxophone, piano and guitar.

In his college admissions essay, MCLA junior Ben Testa, 26, of Dalton, Mass., wrote about his dream to be a sports broadcaster. Testa, who transferred from Berkshire Community College, is a non-traditional student. He dreams of being a sports broadcaster for baseball or wrestling and has a show on the college’s radio station WJJW, "Testa Sports Zone."

Benjamin Cassidy is a reporter with The Berkshire Eagle. He can be reached at bcassidy@berkshireeagle.com, at @jbencassidy on Twitter and 413-496-6251.

"At the end of the day, we’re not just trying to enroll first-year students. We’re trying to enroll alumni."

— Tony Cabasco, Bennington Vice President of Enrollment

some of the rejection calls he’s had to make, adding that he appreciates the college’s review system.

"I trust the committee," MCLA Assistant Director of Admission Dayne Wahl said of his institution’s process. At MCLA, the school welcomes the use of the Common App except from July 24 through Aug. 1, during which only the MCLA Online Application is accepted.

The review process starts with one of the school’s five freshman admissions counselors reviewing an application that comes from his or her recruitment “territory.” A committee consisting of the MCLA’s freshman admissions counselors subsequently reviews the material, looking at each student’s high school transcript, SAT or ACT scores, letters of recommendation, and essay, which is not required but highly recommended.

"I think it does give us an insight into who they are if we never were able to meet them on the road or at an event," Wahl said.

Sitting around a table at MCLA’s Office of Admission, the counselors each share their list of students. To put grades and scores in context, staffers often use charts to show a particular high school’s median GPA and test scores. The group doesn’t look at class rank.

Demonstrated interest in the school is also a significant factor: School visits and phone or in-person interviews can boost applicants’ chances. For example, during an interview, if a student with low test scores and grades demonstrates passion, creativity and a desire to seek out diverse perspectives and endeavors, that can help, according to Wahl.

Eventually, the presenting counselor asks the rest of the committee for an opinion.

"The outcome from there can be accept, reject, interview, wait for more grades, talk to the school counselor," Hollins said.

For fall 2017, MCLA, a public liberal arts school, received 1,946 first-time freshmen applications, accepting 1,494, or 76.8 percent of applicants, and enrolling 289 students, or about 19.9 percent of accepted applicants. Admissions office administrators generate both acceptance and rejection letters from templates, with the “P.S.” note added by counselors to acceptances. Rejected students are encouraged to attend community colleges and later apply to MCLA as transfer students.

Bennington College, a private liberal arts school, is more selective than MCLA and has a slightly different human approach. To start, two admissions counselors are assigned to every application, both reading approximately 250-300 applications twice; one of the counselors often recruits in the applicant’s territory.

Obvious acceptances and rejections are noted and rejected applications are removed from a committee review that consists of the school’s nine admissions counselors. According to Shearer, standout applications often include straight As, strong writing skills and exemplary levels of creativity and community involvement. Disappointing applications typically feature multiple Cs and Ds and poor writing skills.

"There’s really no student that’s questionable that doesn’t go by the entire committee," Shearer said.

Bennington College accepts two different types of applications. Many students apply via the Common App, but others can submit what’s known as the school’s Dimensional Application.

"The Dimensional App is really just an alternative for students who feel like the Common App might not paint the whole picture of them," Shearer said. "Through the Dimensional App, students can essentially curate their own application, so they’ll submit any materials that they feel are helpful. Sometimes that includes test scores. We will require a transcript. Typically they’ll submit something that might look like a portfolio but is a little bit more extensive and curated."

Strong writing is essential in both application types; counselors use an internal rating system to assess it, which Shearer said is common among colleges.

"At the end of the day, our evaluation is the same, which is: Do we feel the student has shown the academic preparedness and the intellectual ability, the writing ability, to be successful in a broad liberal arts curriculum?" Bennington Vice President of Enrollment Tony Cabasco said.

Interviews are vital, as is fit at a school that admitted 57 percent of its 1,494 applicants for fall 2018 and enrolled 24 percent of those admitted.

"At the end of the day, we’re not just trying to enroll first-year students. We’re trying to enroll alumni," Cabasco said. "We’re trying to enroll students who will come here, benefit from this education, but also contribute to it and become part of our community."

Benjamin Cassidy is a reporter with The Berkshire Eagle. He can be reached at bcassidy@berkshireeagle.com, at @jbencassidy on Twitter and 413-496-6251.
Good essay examples

Compiled by Benjamin Cassidy and Gillian Jones

We asked some area college students to share their admission-winning application essays. Here are some excerpts from what they wrote:

Prompt: The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

Response: Brooklyn Pratt of Dalton, Mass., wrote about her experience of being diagnosed with Alopecia. Accepted at University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Merrimack College, University of New Hampshire.

… My doctor diagnosed me with Alopecia, an autoimmune disorder that triggered my immune system to attack my hair follicles. By this time, I had lost much more hair on the back of my neck and had almost no hair around my ears. Other sections of hair were continuing to visibly thin. The treatment options were limited and unpleasant: steroid injections to the scalp with a 60% success rate. I wasn’t afraid of shots and I wanted my hair back. So every three weeks, I went to the doctor and got injections on all of my bald and thinning patches — the majority of my head.

I exited the office the same way each week: tears in my eyes and a grid of scabs on my head. I felt pathetic, weak, and insecure. When worn down, the hair on the top of my head covered my exposed scalp, but there were very few strands. When worn up, my bald patches gleared. I was embarrassed. Embarrassed to go to school, embarrassed to go to my dance classes, embarrassed to leave my house. Who goes bald at sixteen? … Losing Astro made me realize how much I joked about it, the fact that I was losing my hair hurt me. Time and time again, they told me that I would be okay when I didn’t think things would be and remained grounded and held me there with them. Through their confidence in me, I became more confident in myself. I began to wear my hair up without worrying. I stressed less about my hair. I learned to not care what people said or thought about my hair or me. I became comfortable with who I was and realized that my long, blonde hair did not define me. It was merely a small piece of me that fit into a much larger picture. …

Prompt: Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Response: Aidan Rawson of Oxford, Mass. wrote about opening up to his friends and family about his sexuality. Accepted to the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, English/Communications, Class of 2021.

As a young boy, I remember watching movies like Cinderella, Aladdin, and High School Musical, intrigued by the male leads in these films. What began as a yearning to be the prince who swept the princess off her feet, or the high school basketball player who redefined stereotypes by auditioning for a lead in the school play, soon became an infatuation with the male leads themselves. Not long into my fascination, I realized how different I was from my friends. Most of my male companions were extremely masculine, athletic, and relatively close-minded. On the other hand, I hated sports, and enjoyed exploring unique experiences, such as singing, dancing and the theatre. As time went on and my body and mind began to mature, I came to realize that what truly set me apart from my friends was attraction. Like two magnets repelling from each other, my friends were straight, and I — not so much. … At just 12 years old, I finally decided to confide in a few friends about my discovery. Soon thereafter, I began to include more and more people — my parents, my brother, and the majority of my school community. Due to my age, I was frequently questioned, “How could you know such a mature thing at such a young age?”

At first I didn’t really have an answer — it just felt right, like I had finally found something that my magnet would attract to. However, time has taught me that no one truly knows anyone like they know themselves. … Sadly, this is not a unanimous experience. Living openly as a homosexual can be dangerous depending on the culture of where you reside, as many societies and religions condemn homosexuality. As a result, many of those who attempt to live authentically are at risk to discrimination, hate crimes, violence, and in some cases, death. Coming out not only caused me to quickly transition into adulthood, but made me realize how fortunate I am to be able to do so — Fearless of such drastic consequences.

Prompt: Describe something that changed your life.

Response: Moira Mathieu of Belchertown, Mass., wrote about coping with the loss of her best friend. Accepted at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, Environmental Science, Class of 2019.

Twenty two months ago my best friend died. Saying goodbye was one of the hardest things my family and I ever had to endure. He died the Saturday before my mid-year exams of an overdose. I was my sophomore year and just days before my 16th birthday. I do not remember much about that week other than the sorrow. …

My best friend had been my first dog, Astro. … LOSING ASTRO MADE ME REALIZE THAT EVERYTHING AND EVERYTHING WE LOVE HAS TO LEAVE US AT ONE POINT OR ANOTHER. IT HAS TAUGHT ME THAT LOSING SOMEONE IS NOT NECESSARILY A BAD THING. YOU NEVER LOSE THEM AS LONG AS THERE ARE GREAT MEMORIES TO GO BACK TO. YOU BECOME A STRONGER PERSON AND A MUCH BETTER FRIEND. ASTRO WILL FOREVER HAVE A PLACE IN MY HEART.

Prompt: Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Response: Alyssa Cali of Mohagen Lake, N.Y. wrote about her aspirations to earn a black belt in karate. Accepted by the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, Psychology, Class of 2020.

Standing in the ring ready to fight, my hands tighten into fists. When my instructor says go, both of us are ready. Both of us are driven. … I’ve been doing karate for the last four years of my life. My life has forever changed, for the better. Before I found my dojo, I was a scared twelve-year-old that avoided confrontations. That changed shortly after starting my training at Go No Sen. I’m currently a brown belt, and only three belts away from my black belt. …

… Since starting karate, I have gained more confidence and I’ve learned that I shouldn’t keep quiet. I’m no longer that scared little girl. Instead, I’m quick to defend myself and I state my case. My teachers have said they love how straightforward and honest I am, and I think that has to do with my training. Since learning I’m capable of much more than I thought I was, I like to push myself. I don’t just learn something and then do it mediocre; I try to make it perfect. …
Celebi recalled.

Bright she was, and also how very disoriented, Celebi recalled.

She has met people in all states of emotion and well-being. Celebi has had Valdospinos as her student.

In advent of graduation this spring, Pittsfield High School student Anya Valdospinos sits down to talk with her English language teacher, Louise Celebi, about how far they’ve both come.

Pittsfield High School English language teacher, Louise Celebi, left, sits down to talk with senior Anya Valdospinos, about what they’ve learned from each other over the past three years that Celebi has had Valdospinos as her student.

By Jenn Smith

PITTSFIELD, Mass. — Anya Valdospinos arrived in Pittsfield in April 2016, just days before her 16th birthday, to live with a mother she didn’t grow up with.

Compared with the beautiful quinceañera she had surrounded by her great-grandparents, cousins and friends the previous year, her 16th birthday was “really sad actually for me. It was very different.”

In addition to having to build a relationship with her mother, Valdospinos had to go to a new school, learn a new language and simultaneously learn the subjects she needed to change the world.

“I didn’t know English at all,” she said. “My mind wanted to explode. The time was passing really slowly.”

Fortunately, said Valdospinos, she landed with a warm welcome in Louise Celebi’s classroom on the second floor of Pittsfield High School.

During a nearly 20-year career of working with kids and adults learning English as a second language, Celebi has met people in all states of emotion and well-being.

She remembers her first days with Valdospinos.

“It was very obvious to me how bright she was, and also how very disoriented,” Celebi recalled.

After a period of skipping school, struggling with new friends who used drugs, and generally being homesick, Valdospinos began to set new goals for herself, including “being away from drama,” to focus on making more positive decisions.

“I just knew I wanted to study to be a better version of Anya,” she said. Despite the odds, Valdospinos passed her state exams during her first spring in the United States. Today, she’s a high school senior who’s set to graduate this spring with honors, and has already received some college acceptance letters.

Valdospinos loves her classes, her friends, her family, and especially her teacher, Ms. Celebi.

“Sometimes, I was really lost. You give me the help that I really need,” the student told her teacher. “We need more teachers like that, when one teacher cares about you because they know who you are. You give me that confidence.”

Said Celebi to Valdospinos, “I couldn’t have done that if you weren’t brave enough to trust a stranger. We had to build that bridge together.”

Next month, Valdospinos is set to celebrate a very happy 19th birthday. “I am a new person,” said Valdospinos. “I want to be a professional. I’m proud of who I am ... and now I know I want to help people. I want to change the world.”

“I never said it’s going to be easy. But, I’m going to learn.”

Valdospinos and Celebi recently sat down to talk with each other about their experiences together over the past three years.

Below are lightly edited excerpts from their interview with one another. For the full interview, visit berkshireeagle.com.

LOUISE CELEBI: You’ve been back to Ecuador recently do your family and friends in Ecuador notice the change that you’re talking about?

ANYA VALDOSPINOS: Yes, especially my friends, they laugh with me, yes. They see I’m not fighting anymore with some people. My family knows that I’ve had very [difficult] relationship with my mom, and, because [they know] who I am, maybe they think it was very difficult — it was really difficult — but they’re really happy for me because they know how it’s now a good relationship.

When I went [back] to Ecuador ... a lot of things changed. I feel so different. It’s like, it’s my country, I know that, but I don’t feel like the same as [I] was living in there.

CELEBI: [Deep breath. Sigh.] I understand that so much because my husband and I often talk about that. We started our life in Turkey together, and when we go back to Turkey, it’s as if we don’t fully belong there. And when we’re here, it’s as if we don’t fully belong here. So you’re like in this in-between land ...

VALDOSPINOS: Yeah ...

CELEBI: We have a phrase that we say. It’s called “no man’s land.” So I feel you in your heart. So you go back as you’ve changed and you don’t fit quite like you fit before, and, um, I feel that here even. (Celebi is originally from Texas.)

VALDOSPINOS: [Nodding] Yeah ... It’s like, I see my friends now in college, in their university, but it’s not the same. They’re thinking about other things. I’m thinking about another thing; I have other goals, and they have other goals. People change.

CELEBI: I know you just got your acceptances to college and you’re proud, and your mom and family — I’m very happy for you. I’m wondering, what do you think it’s going to feel like to be on your own?

VALDOSPINOS: Oh my gosh. [Both
‘I know that if I’m going to be a doctor, I can go to another place and make the difference. Maybe it’s not changing the world, but I can go and change the world of that person.’

— Anya Valdospinos, Pittsfield High School senior

VOLDO SPINOS: What do you think about the students who are graduating this year? What have you learned from them?

CELEBI: I think I’m going to really miss that group. It’s a big group. It’s a dynamic group — a lot of high-achieving students, a lot of kids who have goals for the future and are working really hard to realize those goals.

I’m always amazed, and I try to let you guys know how much I’m

CELEBI: You talked about changing the world: in what field? In what way? In what part of the world?

VALDOSPINOS: I don’t know what is going to be next after my graduation from college. I don’t know if I’m going to be here or if I’m going to travel — I love travel, you know that.

... But my experience in my country, for medicine, in my country there is nothing. I have the opportunity here to learn medicine. I love medicine and I always love to help people, not just in medicine but other people’s needs. If one friend is sad, I’m going to be there for that friend. I know that if I’m going to be a doctor, I can go to another place and make the difference. Maybe it’s not changing the world, but I can go and change the world of that person.
amazed by what you do. You know how we read that whole article about bilinguals being smarter than monolinguals — but just to remind you, it’s as if you have two brains, and two hearts, so it’s like you have super powers going out into the world. And I’m really happy that the response that you’re getting from your applications are starting to validate to you all the hard work that you do. ...

I think you guys, as a whole, are a focused group and I think that is really going to support your success, like you said, in whatever you’re going to do. You’re going to go to college and you don’t know where that road is going to lead, but you’re starting the journey. You’re initiating that journey yourself.

No one said you had to apply for college. No one said you had to work for 10 days on an essay. No one said you had to lose sleep and get stressed and make yourself sick to make that happen. You chose it and you did it. You guys have a lot to be proud of. A lot.

VALDOSPINOS: You’re a really good teacher, Ms. Celebi. ... You don’t just teach the work, you teach more than that, to help [us] be a human. That’s why the students care about you.

CELEBI: Thank you so much.
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