

SCHOOL

A Special Supplement to the Sullivan County Democrat

SCENE

A look inside the Liberty Central School



SECTION L, DECEMBER 1, 2020 • CALLICOON, NY



Facing down the coronavirus:

Adapting and finding gratefulness

BY KATHY DALEY

Even in the midst of a pandemic, good things happen. The other day, Liberty Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Augustine E. Tornatore, fielded an email from a new homeowner. She wanted him to know that she and her family had purchased a home in Liberty after researching the town and the school district.

"They are from Manhattan, did their research and she told me 'because of you, we bought in Liberty,'" Tornatore said.

A bright light in blustery times.

Given the continued rise of coronavirus cases across the U.S., school superintendents join teachers and parents in a gnawing anxiety over the spread of the virus. A little over a week ago, Tornatore had to put the high school on remote learning until Dec. 2 when three individuals in the school district tested positive for the virus.

It's happening in school districts everywhere. But they muster on and, in Liberty, joyful things happen every day.

"I'm beyond proud of my team," Tornatore said. "Everybody here is giving 120 percent."

CREATING LEADERS

This year, the schools launched Leader in Me (LIM), a nationwide



Superintendent of Schools Dr. Augustine E. Tornatore takes a turn disinfecting desks at the high school. With him is Assistant Principal Tiffane Barrow.

comprehensive school improvement model developed in partnership with educators. LIM borrows from the best-selling book "7 Habits of Highly Effective People," and stresses that anyone can be a winner by intentionally leading one's own life and encouraging the greatness in others.

The program teaches work and study habits, such as a "can-do" attitude rather than blaming some-

one else; planning ahead and setting goals; and spending time on the most important things.

Another leap in Liberty is a Student Liaison program, whereby third graders on up to seniors in high school meet in groups with Tornatore. Through video conferencing with the students, he gets the pulse of what's going on in the schools.

"We talk issues, ideas and con-

cerns," he said. "I always felt that we should be really listening to kids."

Liberty prides itself as a true "community school," with the school district as the centerpoint of the village and town. To that end, for example, this season will see the Student Council at the middle school meeting virtually with residents of the Care Center at Sunset

PLEASE SEE **ADAPTING**, PAGE 7L

School Scene

'A Look Inside the Liberty Central School District'

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BY KATHY DALEY

If COVID-19 keeps Liberty students from enjoying the in-person healthy eating program called 'A Single Bite,' then the program will go to the kids.

"We're working on a virtual version of what we do in the classrooms," said 'A Single Bite' Executive Director Audrey Garro. "That way teachers can either share it with students in their classroom or students can experience it virtually at home. We'll be sending the virtual version out in December."

Before COVID-19, the local nonprofit worked in-person with school districts' food and nutrition classes to introduce children to the difference between processed food and real food, where real food comes from and how to make simple healthy meals.

The concept of choice when it comes to what people eat is

'A Single Bite' goes virtual: But delicious dinners are real

emphasized in 'A Single Bite' classes. "It's up to you," said Sims Foster, who, along with wife Kirstin launched A Single Bite. The couple's firm, Foster Supply Hospitality, owns the North Branch Inn, Kenoza Hall, Arnold House in Shandeleo, Nine River Road in Callicoon and the DeBruce in Livingston Manor. The Fosters also run The Cabin in Jeffersonville and Piccolo Paese in Liberty.

"We make real food cool," says Foster.

Now they also make real food accessible to families during the coronavirus crisis.

"The stark reality is that COVID has exacerbated poverty and food insecurity," that is, the limited or uncertain availability of food, noted Garro.

After going into high gear literally 10 days after schools closed in March, "we began feeding 300 people a week," she said.

Along with needy families throughout Sullivan County, families in the Liberty Central School District now enjoy healthy dinners several times each week. Some 68 children and 48 adults in Liberty alone benefit from the 'A Single Bite' family meals initiative.

A recent menu included roast pork, roast butternut squash, locally grown corn on the cob and a big fresh salad, Garro said.

The healthy meals are cooked and packaged at the headquarters of Foster Supply Hospitality and 'A Single Bite' on Route 52 in Youngsville, a site known locally as the former Clair Inn.

"Our staff delivers to Liberty Middle School, where volunteers have a route including several families to whom they deliver directly," explained Garro. "We are delivering meals to every school district in the county. In some cases we put the meals on (school) buses but most are personally delivered by volunteers."

In Liberty, "Superintendent Dr. Augustine Tornatore and Heather Cheh, principal at Liberty Middle School, have been amazing to work with," Garro said. "They connect us directly to families who are struggling with food insecurity. We also work with

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This summer at Liberty Middle School, Barbi Neumann-Marty of Parksville (at left) offered a meal to a mom as part of A Single Bite's family meal program. Neumann-Marty serves with the Liberty Rotary Club and works for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Town of Wallkill. To support or volunteer for 'A Single Bite,' go to www.asinglebite.org, or email info@asinglebite.org.

three social workers at the schools to be sure we are reaching those most in need of assistance: Lynne Diener, Roberta Taylor and Alanna Newman."

Recently, Diener told Garro that a mother confided she is now on unemployment and stressed out over finances and food. "Healthy food is expensive and these meals are a huge help," she told Diener.

Volunteers help hugely in the meal program. "We're humbled by the many creative and generous ways that people have supported our family meal pro-

gram," said Garro. For example, Resorts World Catskills recently donated a refrigerator that provides added storage for the farm-fresh vegetables and prepared family meals.

In a small but helpful way, students themselves participate.

"Earlier this year, students at Liberty Middle School planted garlic in their school garden and donated their crop to 'A Single Bite,'" said Garro. "Our chef roasted the bulbs and included the roasted garlic as part of the meals delivered to families in the neighborhood."



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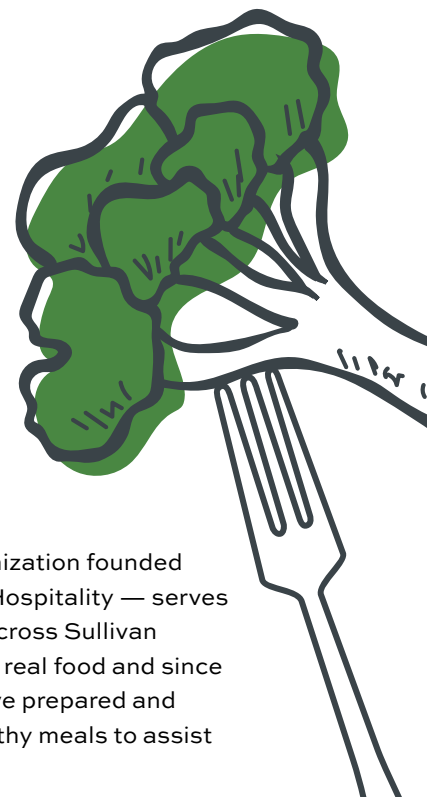


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From home, middle school kids take cooking seriously

BY KATHY DALEY

Jill Weiner and her students are making the best of the situation caused by COVID.

The interesting thing about their new endeavor – cooking classes – is that the lessons could not have taken place without the pandemic.

“We didn’t have ovens in our classroom,” said Weiner.

So she’s taking the baking online. So far, from the comfort of their own family kitchens, her students have baked pumpkin bread and cornbread, with parents or other family members watching or helping.

Weiner teaches a self-contained life-skills class for special needs middle school students. Nine children make up the class.

“Last year, we organized a monthly cafe at school,” said Weiner, “where we did different things: offered veggies and dips, nachos, fruit and whipped cream... things that were non-cook recipes. It helps to give the students life skills, it helps them socially, it gives them job skills.”

Then came the pandemic, which also ruled out trips to Achieve Rehab and Nursing Facility in Liberty. Typically, her students would make crafts with the residents. Or they’d go for tours to New Hope Community in Loch Sheldrake, a program that supports people

with intellectual and other developmental disabilities.

Now at Liberty Middle School, three of Weiner’s students attend in-person learning three days each week and then learn by computer at home the rest of the week. The additional six other students learn virtually from home every day.

But once each month, at about 6:30 p.m. the nine students “gather” in their kitchens with flour, baking powder, sugar, big bowls and warm ovens.

The school district’s web-based platform, Google Classroom, allows students to see one another on the screen in little boxes, as does Zoom.

“It’s amazing,” said Weiner. “For the cooking classes, all of my students are there on time and ready” as they prepare to whip up delicious delights.

“They are learning reading, following directions, sequencing skills,” said Weiner. “They use math as they measure out flour or baking powder. We go at our own pace, stopping for a minute if someone gets held up.”

Weiner has taught for 25 years in the Liberty Central School District. This year is special.

“I get to see my students in their kitchens, I see their parents involved,” she said. “It gives us all that personal touch.”



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Teacher Jill Weiner, at center, and two students work on designing and printing up a recipe for cornbread as they prepare for cooking night.

Special education teacher Jill Weiner has worked in the Liberty school district for 25 years. In September, she was recognized for that milestone, along with others, at Superintendent’s Conference Day.



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ADAPTING: Making it work safely

FROM PAGE 2L

Lake. The students will create virtual holiday cards, complete with falling snow, at a “get-together” on Thursday, Dec. 10.

FROM THE BEGINNING

Still, daily life at the District is underscored by the coronavirus. To begin with, noted the superintendent, the District surveyed and held informational forums for parents, students, staff and the community.

Then, to ensure the District was prepared for a substantial leap in dependence on technology, bandwidth was doubled along with wireless access points. Staff searched out community “hot-spots” for families that don’t have internet at home, coming up with sites as varied as the public library and the hospital to McDonald’s and Dunkin’ Donuts,

Then, “when school started, I sat down with my team and said I want to roll in grades every two weeks” (instead of the whole population

starting in together),” Tornatore said. “I wanted to give the children the time to get to feel safe and comfortable.”

First, pre-k to grade 2 showed up, then grade three and then grade four. Students were divided into small groups, or pods, and interactions are limited within the pods for safety against infection.

In the older grades, middle school fifth graders arrived at the school first in September, and at the high school, ninth graders came first, both categories entering, for them, new buildings that would take getting used to.

All students from pre-k to second grade have their own ipads with keyboards. From third to twelfth grades, students use chromebooks.

“The coronavirus has brought up a lot of crazy things,” said Dr. Tornatore. “But I do think people are more appreciative, more grateful. Even in the worst scenarios, there’s a silver lining. We’re all in this together.”

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Is every student a leader?

Middle School says 'Yes!'

BY KATHY DALEY

Students and staff at Liberty Middle School are knee deep in a new program of empowerment that opens minds and hearts, say teachers Danielle Cummins and Suzanne Wilson.

The duo coordinate the school's Leader in Me team that echoes the work throughout the U.S. to encourage children to be leaders. Kids do that by focusing on seven habits: take responsibility for your own actions and choices instead of making excuses; have a plan for how you can

achieve success; put first things first; think win-win (everyone can win!); seek first to understand and then to be understood; together is better; take care of yourself.

"The seven habits are not only good for kids — they are good for all and are good life skills," says Middle School Principal Heather Cheh.

The Liberty Central School District began its involvement in Leader in Me last year, when faculty began learning about the program. The decision to implement came from a state mandate

requiring districts to select a systemic social and emotional wellness program for all its schools.

Now underway, the program borrows from the 1989 best seller by businessman Stephen R. Covey entitled "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." Later, there were other books "7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens" and "The 7 Habits of Happy Kids."

Here, teachers Suzanne Wilson and Danielle Cummins explain the new program in a question and answer session with the **Sullivan County Democrat**.

Democrat: How has this program become so popular?

Cummins and Wilson: The philosophy behind the program is to create highly successful people at all stages of life. The program was originally created for corporate America and after proven to be successful, was adopted by many school districts.

Democrat: How is the program played out daily?

Cummins and Wilson: The unique language of Leader in Me has been incorporated throughout lessons in all content areas. We have focused for the first few months of school on Habit 1 — Be Proactive. This habit is centered around being responsible and taking initiative for one's own learning. We chose to focus on this because many students are learning remotely and are responsible for the success of their learning this school year. This habit also teaches students how to be accountable for their own choices

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and not blame others for their actions.

We also incorporate the seven habits into our daily morning announcements that are presented by student leader volunteers. We have also recently implemented an afternoon announcement where students and staff can make music requests to be played over the intercom at the end of each school day.

Democrat: What are the results of the program so far?

Cummins and Wilson: Staff and students have adopted the program with open minds and hearts. Staff are embracing the language and transitioning flawlessly to a growth mindset approach. Students are sharing the seven habits with the entire school through our daily morning announcements. Staff are incorporating the habits into lessons. There has been a building-wide shift in morale and students are beginning to view themselves as leaders.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS
At left: Using art throughout the school, students focus on good habits such as taking responsibility and engaging in a plan, for example.

At right: A Leader in Me, aligned with national and state academic standards, equips students with leadership and life skills, emphasizing that anyone can be a leader.



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School community and students rally to create 'leadership for all'

BY KATHY DALEY

Senior Sophia Medina has got a lot on her plate. COVID-19 has her finishing up her high school career from home. She's in a bunch of clubs at school, and she's awaiting the results of an early application and interview with Vassar College in Poughkeepsie.

But there's time and energy enough for Medina to introduce Liberty High School students to the Leader in Me program that has a good chance of electrifying the school.

"Leader in Me (LIM) began for us last year," said Medina, referring to training sessions led by a representative from Franklin Covey. That firm's school-based Leader in Me program revolves around the understanding that all children have gifts, talents and leadership abilities.

Summer sessions for Liberty's LIM adult and student leadership teams continued the training for the District-wide project that "teaches students how to look within themselves to find the leader there," Medina said.

Once students grasp the leadership within, they open up to "we," that is, working together as leaders to accomplish great things.

New at the school are LIM-related empowerment groups for males and females. The Young Men's Empowerment Group and the Young Ladies Empowerment Group meet once a month to encourage student awareness of their own gifts. Facilitators include the school social worker and school counselor, teacher assistant, teacher aide and the school's resource officer from Liberty Police Department. Assistant Principal Tiffane Barrow spearheads the initiative.

LIM focus was on leadership. In October, it took on the concept of potential and in November, change.

"Students are being more reflective and feeling more a part of the community," said Barrow.

The LIM campaign has also drafted individuals for a Liberty High School Parent, Staff and Community Group. The mission is to promote a positive community environment that embraces perseverance and integrity as defining attributes for each student at Liberty High.

Science teacher Lucinda Nolan, who supervises the school's National Honor Society, is also linking LIM with a peer tutoring program.

"We have 13 National Honor students (including Medina) signed up to volunteer in coaching students in English language arts, math, science, social studies and world language," said Nolan.

Medina is also the director and producer of a tool for getting the Leader in Me message out to the high school at large. It's a vlog, that is, a blog that posts videos where students talk on a particular subject or report on an event. The videos are shared with the school in morning announcement videos and now appear on twitter and instagram pages.

"We meet every month and create vlogs to talk about Liberty pride," said Medina. "For example, I sat on a senior rock and spoke about all that my class has done here. Another person talked about how proud we are of our music department. Another discussed 'what makes a person a leader?'"

"There is power within each person," said Medina. "We are helping them to question themselves and their peers. We are seeing the leader in them."



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Liberty High School senior Sophia Medina speaks from one of the school's 'senior rocks' about the true leader each person has within.



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