



# NEWS



NOW, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE

## Renovations Bring New Pride in Learning

**C**hanges at 60 West Street are bringing new excitement about learning for students at Westbridge Academy. The 75-year-old brick building – which has been home to Westbridge Academy since the school opened more than 40 years ago – was structurally sound, but needed repairs and upgrades.



Cristian likes the new media lounge

School leadership initiated a multi-step plan to make physical improvements to the learning environment. Westbridge reconfigured the floor plan to add two new classrooms, a science lab, and a media

center; upgraded and reconfigured clinical rooms to improve privacy and reduce noise; and installed new classroom furniture and fixtures to maximize learning.



Science teacher Lauren Thompson, with students T'kai and Kaerah, like the new science lab.

The changes will also save on energy costs. As part of an ongoing “green strategy,” the renovations included the installation of energy efficient windows and a new HVAC system with fresh air technology, along with new floor and carpeting to reduce allergens and dust.



Omari likes the new music room

One of the most exciting changes is the new science lab, which includes workstations where students can carry out experiments, enhancing the hands-on learning of a STEAM curriculum (Science, Technology, Engineering Arts, Mathematics). The new media lab, with computers and hi-speed internet connections, will infuse technology into lesson plans.

According to the school’s Director, Dr. Viviana Litovsky, the physical space affects psychological thinking.

“Students need to take pride in the school they attend. These renovations will help shift students’ thinking about what learning means to them, and will help them embrace learning rather than running away from it,” said Dr. Litovsky. “Now, anything is possible.”

“Westbridge Academy is fortunate to have a generous base of private supporters who help make these renovations possible. We could not do our work without them,” she concluded. ■

**Thank You!**

Westbridge Academy thanks Paul and Jill Zaitchick for their ongoing and deep commitment to our students and our school.

# Jovan: A True Success Story



Jovan with Tamara Villagran

When 18-year-old Jovan Rodriguez graduates from Westbridge Academy this June, he will take pride and personal growth with him. School leaders describe Jovan as mature, respectful, patient, inspiring, encouraging, perseverant and a mentor to other students.

It has not always been that way.

"When I first got here, I did not like all the structure, but I have changed a lot," said Jovan. "Everything is different now - my posture, my social skills, my behavior, and especially my grades. Science is my favorite subject," he said.

Jovan credits his success to "the love and the care" he has received from staff. "They always went the extra mile for me," he said.

He advises other students not to take the easy route to success: "If there are two roads, I think it is better to go through the blood, the sweat and the tears to get there, not just fly over it. Once you reach your goal, you will be very proud of yourself."

After graduation, Jovan will follow in his family's tradition of service. He hopes to work with the Irvington Police Department, or join the armed forces.

According to Tamara Villagran, his case manager for the last 6 years, Jovan has taken full advantage of the programs and supports Westbridge offers, and has worked hard.

"Jovan holds a lot of promise. He came as a boy and leaves as a young man. We will all miss him," said Dr. Viviana Litovsky. ■

## TEACHER PROFILE:

### Meet Lauren Thompson, Science Teacher

Since joining the staff at Westbridge Academy this fall, Ms. Thompson has been described as a creative, high energy, gifted educator with a deep love of science.

Ms. Thompson teaches middle school and high school science, and according to her colleagues, has created a classroom in which students feel academically challenged yet safe enough to take risks in learning.

"She is compassionate and really understands her students. She brings 'out-of-the box' instructional strategies to her classroom," said Dr. Viviana Litovsky. "Because of her, our students are opening up to science." ■



Lauren Thompson

## Making Sure that Nothing Gets "Lost in Translation"

For Eva Payano-Veras, School Social Worker at Westbridge Academy, the work she does with Spanish-speaking students and their families is deeply personal.

"I am a first generation American whose parents' first language was Spanish. I had to translate for my family, so I know what it feels like to not be fully understood," she said.

Roughly 35% of the students who attend Westbridge Academy are Latino. Although many are bilingual, educators and therapists are making every effort to be sure nothing is "lost in translation," especially when communicating with families around sensitive and complex issues. That starts with a bilingual staff.

Tamara Villagran, a counselor at the school, believes that having a bilingual staff lays the groundwork needed to get the therapeutic process started on day one.

"Having bilingual counselors allows us to help our Spanish-speaking students even before they walk in the door - it allows us to connect to families. Immediately, it is clear to them that we understand, not only their child's needs, but also their language, their values, and their culture," she said.

That understanding starts at the top. Director, Dr. Viviana Litovsky, is bilingual. "We honor diversity. All of our families have a second home here," she said.

Ms. Villagran believes that there is a huge need to support children and families in the local community. "We are always looking for new ways to reach families to help them understand the culturally sensitive supports we can provide," she said. ■



Tamara Villagran, one of several bilingual counselors at Westbridge Academy

# Reaching Beyond Our Own Walls: Public/Private Partnerships

**L**eaders from Westbridge Academy offered an important message to a crowd of more than 250 public school paraprofessionals: “When working with students who have behavior challenges, YOU are an agent of change!”

That theme, and many others, was part of a 2-hour program provided by Westbridge Academy during a workshop organized by Union City public schools to help the district’s special education paraprofessionals better meet the needs of students with challenging behavior.

“The training focused on how to meet the needs of students with disabilities in a culturally, economically and linguistically diverse school setting,” said Anthony Hadzimichalis, Ed.D., Principal.

Dr. Hadzimichalis and Dr. Viviana Litovsky, Director at Westbridge, led Union City’s paraprofessionals through discussion and activities designed to allow them to build empathy, and learn about the vital role that they play in the lives of students with disabilities.

The training came about after Westbridge Academy was recommended to Union City as a training resource during a recent meeting of Hudson County special education leaders.

The Westbridge team was so well received, they are returning to train more staff.

“We are deeply honored, not only to have been asked to help, but now, to have been invited back. We have been in the community for more than 40 years and are a resource for schools in the area,” said Dr. Hadzimichalis.

“Opportunities like this are exciting because it gives us the chance to have an impact on more students and stakeholders,” he concluded. ■



Dr. Viviana Litovsky and Dr. Anthony Hadzimichalis

## The Take Away: Important Messages for Paraprofessionals

### 1 Effective Communication is Vital:

Communicate with the teacher, related service professionals, nursing services, social workers, etc.

### 2 Know the Student:

Understand the child’s social and emotional needs. Get to know the child’s peers, learning style, limitations and challenges.

### 3 Know the Instructional Objectives:

Review the lesson plans, take part in re-teaching and pre-teaching, be able to summarize the lesson of the day and know how it fits into the larger picture.

### 4 Take Care of Yourself:

As agents of change, paraprofessionals need to be aware of their own needs and avoid “compassion fatigue.”

**Westbridge Academy offers a range of workshops and seminars, both at the school and off-site, to support the work of our public school colleagues.**

**To learn more, contact Dr. Hadzimichalis at 973-429-8110.**



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## About Westbridge Academy:

Created in a culture of caring, **WESTBRIDGE ACADEMY** is a unique special needs school in which students with behavioral and emotional disabilities are taught to face their issues so that they can have productive, fulfilling lives.

**WESTBRIDGE ACADEMY'S** progressive approach maintains a structured environment that is warm and nurturing – one day and one student at a time – to support each student's well-being. **WESTBRIDGE ACADEMY** is accredited by the state of New Jersey. Students are placed by their local public schools and attend at no cost to parents.

### FAST FACTS:

#### STUDENT PROFILE:

Students in grades K-12 with emotional, behavioral and learning challenges. Many are bi-lingual.

#### APPROACH:

Combining individualized academics with therapeutic support.

#### PROGRAMS:

Elementary, Middle and High School; Community-based Instruction and Transition Services; Extended School Year.

#### STUDENT TEACHER RATIO: 6:1

#### AREAS SERVED:

Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Middlesex, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, and Union Counties.



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