

THE ISLAND SCHOOL

Interviews were conducted with Jason Hasko (Community Director) and Barbara Solony (Art Teacher).

Liza Torrence & Rhea Creado

Jason Hasko:

I started out here as the counselling therapist and then throughout the past 4 and a half years, I have kind of moved up to house specialist and then I was director of the after school program, and now I'm community school director.

Even before I started here, the school always acted as a community school. I think we've only just officially got the title 2-3 years ago. The mission here has always been about the families...not just the students [and] how do we help them academically, but we are actually #1 in the district, and I think the surrounding districts and the highest population of temporary housing and homeless students.

So, the surrounding projects that we are right across the street from; we get an influx of families and students from there. So it's always about how can we support the families to get on their feet, be more stable and this has really become a kind of hub for them.

There services that we offer are in direct alignment with the Henry Schlutz?? settlements, the Boys and Girls Club that we work with, and just really serving and talking with the families. We bring them in here and ask "what is it that you need?" Then we can support you to have your kids here. Because a lot of times they have to taken them out for doctor's visits and multiple other things. Especially families that have 3-4 children, if one's sick, none of the kids are coming to school.

So we have our four pillars that we really focus on here; are attendance, family engagements, health and wellness and our after school program — like our enrichment. We really inter-mingle with the after school program, in the sense of bringing arts and enrichment to the school and involving the families in that.

A lot of how we do our outreach is honestly just research, writing grants, talking to the community and bringing people in. We are a showcase school also, so we bring other school's and CBO's and invite them just to see what we're doing. There's a lot of professional developments that we find through volunteers, through people that want to help and be a part of the community. A lot of that is parents that have kind of been with us and their kids were raised through here, and now that they're on their feet, their like I want to give back, "I want to do something more."

Family engagement is a big portion of why I feel like we are on a successful rate. Are we where we want to be? Not at all, but we're constantly growing in our scores, in our family engagements, and the kids... as difficult as it is for them with transition, they know that their support is here.

We are going to have a dental office in here. And then we have a full clinic, so they have [unclear] here, they can get all of their exams, all of their shots, vaccinations here. We have a washer and dryer downstairs, and some kids, you know...parents can't afford it, or they are in transition and they forget, and this is how we can help you. We also have a lawyer service that comes in once month to help families with immigration issues, housing issues, job placement. It's finding any and every way... it's like oh you need that? Okay if I can't do it, who can? It really becomes that everybody wears many many hats. So, say I'm community school director, it doesn't stop me from now dishing out food and helping the cafeteria or something else that you have to be willing.

I think what makes our school special... I've heard of other schools where it's the school and there's the after school, and there's no connection. But with Educational Alliance, our after school, we have our mentors come in early and work with the teacher. So they are in alignment and the kids don't look at it as an after school program, but more extended day. They go right into homework help, and then we do our activities and then we bring in the arts. And we try to line up with the academic pieces.

Question: How do you bring in the arts?

We do drama, we do art, we have robotics and technology, photography. Last year we did graphic novels. As part of our stem, one of the things we've done is worked with the drama teacher, and Mr. Thomas, which is the 7th grade teacher, and had the kids do kind of like this movie, like screenplay, and have them design what the front would look like.

It's just amazing what these kids can do and the stories that they have.

Question: Are they encouraged to bring their everyday lives into the stories?

Yes! So a lot of that is "what is your story?" And then in true drama therapy fashion, we go okay how do we bring it to the imaginary and then really talk more about their experience. It's a great thing; in the drama therapy world we call it distancing. So it's easier to talk about something when it's not directly yours. So can we talk about our story, but then we make it imaginary. The kids don't really know you have to learn how to lie... and when the kids lie, in a way they are always telling the truth because they have to go from what they know and their frame of reference. A lot of times they will tell their story and it directly relates to their lives and how they see relationships... like mom's are this way, or this is how a family is supposed to be. And it's really telling. But there's also that feeling that the kids get this story to tell and they are being seen, they are being heard. They are not being ridiculed for it. Not necessarily there's anything you can do with it. Sometimes, we have a lot of counselling here, we have a lot of social workers and volunteers, but at the same time there's certain things that we can't do anything about. So just to have the story and hold that for them and do it in a creative way is really important for them to have that kind of self-expression.

Yesterday we did the Thriller dance. We didn't get to do it on Halloween because of all the safety stuff going on, but you know the kids rehearsed for like a month and they got to dress as zombies, and had the whole school just come in and watch them do the entire 15 minute Thriller song.

And then two years ago we wrote a grant through Disney Musicals in school with kids, and we were one of like 5 schools that got picked, so this will be our third year, and we are going to be doing the Lion King this year. Last year we did Aladdin, and then the year before that we did The Jungle Book. And they help to bring a sustainable theatre program here. Unfortunately, what they do is that they help train teacher's and stuff to be directors, but if the teacher's leaves...

Question: We noticed that your school really encourages socially engaged conversations. We saw the bulletin board downstairs that had things about LGBTQ issues, particularly homophobia, but also raised awareness for natural disasters such as hurricanes...

With Live Out Loud, we are actually having our first GSA group today. We started it at the end of the year last year just to see if students would get involved, and how comfortable they were. Also, you know, bringing that to the parents and having a real discussion about it regarding is this too young for kids to be a part of this? I know my personal belief and it's why we agreed to have this here, but a lot of parents, socially I feel as though there is still a lot of stigma around it, and their scared to touch on the subject. This is a way of really educating the student's and the families about what's going on.

Question: So is that an after school thing or is it engrained in the classroom?

It is going to be through our school, but depending on how the schedule work and the student involvements, it may be an after school or maybe during the day school. Again, I feel that's a way we are really flexible that it doesn't have to be one or the other. Even though I was bringing it in and it was part of the after school per-se, the principal is like okay if we can't do it then, when can we do it during the day here? He is really just open to [the fact that] this is more important, the families are more important. So it doesn't matter when or who, just we need to do it, so someone gets it done.

Question: What's been the reaction from the students and the parents so far in addressing those [possible controversial] issues?

Actually, pretty amazing....

I stopped at 11 minutes, 50 seconds.

Actually it's pretty amazing. Our school president identifies as LGBT. Last year he was the leader of this group and he really rallied students. We had about 10 students. We were just amazed at our turnout especially because we were only about a month in [with this group] and it was towards the end of the year. So the fact that kids were willing and open to participate, and you know usually we say, you know I'll be saying it again when we start now, what do we want to call this group? It doesn't have to be anything that's revealing if you feel unsafe. We will announce that there is a group going on so other people can participate but it doesn't have to be anything where you feel uncomfortable to express yourself in one way or another. It's open for everybody and allies so it's just a support group and to help with education. I think that kind of relieves a lot of pressure for the students. But in general I think it has actually been really well received. That would have never happened with me growing up in my middle school or high school even. I'm just amazed to see how far we still need to go, but also how far we've come.

Question: What's the age group of the students at this school?

We are pre-k to 8th grade. So we do elementary and middle school.

Question: Do you have any other community partnerships? I know you talked about that one specifically but is there anyone you've worked with in the past, or are hoping to work with in the future?

Well, Disney musicals, [VOLS] the lawyers, Ryan Nena for health and wellness. There is a Jewish board who provides social services. We work with Counseling in Schools, CANY which is Creative Alternative of New York, they do drama therapy, which I recommend because I'm a drama therapist. We've had the NYPD. A group of women officers came in. We wanted to do

something to help the girls here, we want them to have a group. They came in and volunteered their time and they were doing a mentor's group with them. We are trying to do that with NYPD male officers to do a boys group as well.

Question: I know you said a lot of these partnerships are just through research, that's how you find them. Do you just look on the internet to find them, do you have personal connections, but what is your approach? One of the things that FAB is interested in is what kind of research are schools doing and how are they finding these out? Are they just the ones that pop up on the internet?

Things that I've found- Expand Ed is a partnership that we have and through that they've been really great at forwarding us the info or "hey this looks really great what do you think?" Being a community school I think the organization itself has been really pushing to make partnerships so they'll send us a letter of information. Miss Ramos has been a part of this community for a long time. A lot of it, a good portion of it comes through her. She'll be like "Here Jason we need this," and then we'll sit down, collaborate and write together. It's also just talking to the community. Or if there's an idea, like I was saying about drama therapy: I'm doing this but now that I'm switching roles I can't be a drama therapist here but they need to have it here, and she's like great, find out where you can. I set up a meeting and then we just built it from there. What can you do, what can you offer to create a connection and then it's always like, "okay if you have this connection what else do you guys do?" I think that our school... we never... Miss Ramos is always like you have to give 150% and you don't really leave work. I find a balance [because I'm a therapist] you need that self-care and you need to be able to leave it behind. But there's that part when there's that momentum and things are working and you want to provide more. I know I would go out with my friends or family and when I talk to people they ask what I do. I tell them I do community school, what do you do? And they say I do music. "Really... so what can you do for us? Do you want to come in?" One of my close friends is going to come in and do poetry. She does poetry all around the city and she just finished a poetry book. She said she was looking for other places to perform. What better place than a community school to inspire kids to write more. If you can give them a workshop or an assignment. Just little things like that. Seeing what talents. We also use Aspire. It's an app... basically what it does is you put your name, your email, your information and then it goes to these different lists of talents, job history, and interests. It kind of coordinates all of that. It'll show us a list. If we want someone to do woodworking or architecture it'll show these people who have any kind of experience or interests in it. It helps us within the community know what strengths the families have. We did it on our family night. We have like 4 or 5 family nights a year and we'll do like math or literacy, health and wellness, and it's a way to bring the community in and talk one about those major points and then how they can help. When we have them fill out the aspire a lot of the parents were like at the beginning "well I don't have any talents... Well you have 5 kids do you cook?... I cook all the time!" That's a talent, I can't cook that kind of food. What else... do you like to write? Just kind of pulling that out of them so they see they have something to offer. Connections is also on there- who do you know or who have you met who has that talent or resource that you don't have. It really helps to find things that way. As a community school we are always open to new ways. If anyone says "I know a way we can do it"... Tell us, or provide us with a way we can have better connections or different connections. That's amazing.

Question: If you have any information on specifically how or if the art classes are connected with the community?

They are completely connected with the community. Barbara Salone, who is one of our artists here who works a lot with the kids is always doing stuff about the community. We're having kids actually right now do sketches for downstairs. When you walk in it says "Our Community." And so those blocks are going to be filled with the kids' sketches of what's happening in the community or what they're connected to, and kind of building a map of how you define community. We've done social action projects with students as well. They've made wallets and rings and little things to help the homeless and they were going out and giving that to them. We've worked on sustainable food. They've cooked bugs and found ways of healthy eating (yeah I've had to eat bugs) but it's wild because it gives them the sense of power and control over their life and what's going on and then how can they give back. And it's amazing you have these kids who are technically homeless but they don't see themselves that way. They don't see themselves as homeless but yet they are trying to find a way to give back to people that are actually living on the streets. That kind of heart and commitment to 'this is part of our community' and we want to do something I think is really powerful.

Question: is there anything that the Fourth Arts Block or we as NYU students could do? Is there anything you're seeking to make connections more or find people to come in?

Yes. We are open to any and everything-ideas that you may have, things that you want to bring here. If it's something in arts and education and it's something you wanted to present around... arts and renaissance or whatever, because they're not really exposed to that- I would say "great, when?" and I would probably set it up for next week and I would make an assembly for you guys just to give that to them. Anything we can do for our kids that's going to enrich their lives or expose them to something more, than just what's in front of them gives them that chance and that resiliency to succeed or strive for something different. Anything you can do. We had a group of people come in once and they wanted to do something but they didn't know what. We said great, we need walls painted, do you want to read to the children? Whatever you want to do to help. The mural downstairs- the people came in because they wanted to do something and this was a way to make the school beautiful and show there's people outside of the community that care and are here for the kids and that are aware of everything going on. Anything you guys want to bring or do or volunteer, yes.

Barbara Solony:

Question: Tell us a little bit about your most successful projects?

One most successful project is my Sketch Club. This is where I take my students into the community and sit around the streets or community gardens and sketch. Their work for 3-5 grade is fantastic. Most of the community gardens I go to have a lot of history to them and some actually have art pieces displayed in their gardens. One of the community garden owner just loved the idea of the kids just sitting there sketching offered me a spot in their gallery to display their work. Which I did and it was a big hit. I always talk about the history of the new garden we go to before also after.

Question: What projects have the students enjoyed, and how have they benefited them?

The benefits they get out of this sketch club is the history of the community, sketching what they see which they thought that they could never do and I always promote their work in the community wherever I can to get my foot in the door to do something new. Like last year Loiasida.org saw my student Sketching in the La Plaza garden and said their work was amazing

and they invite us to some of their art classes in making mask for the Loiasida Festival. Jumped right on it and the kids had a great time going their every week helping make paper mache mask for the festival. At the end my art class walked in the parade with some of the masks and were proud.

Question: What are some projects or topics that you've wanted to cover with your students but have not been able to? Why? Is there a lack of resources?

I can't say anything about lack of resources as I'm out there in the community always looking for some resources for them. Due to the fact that we only get 2 hrs with the time to walk back and forth is really not much time. But what ever time we have I always make it interesting for them as I don't want them to get bored. At the end of every class I always ask them what they thought of the work we did today.

Question: Do you incorporate any social justice issues in art classes? If so, how?

Social Justice issues are always used in my class. But I use it in different ways or bring it out in a different way. Like the history of our community the struggles of the Lower East Side and the struggle still continues till today. For instances La Paza Garden where they go sketching I would show the picture of the past of the garden 1970s how the Garden was back then. where they had tents for shelter and food being served by homeless people living in that lot sharing food and shelter to each other.

Also on Social Justice we did a Art Show on Homelessness in our community. and this year we are doing another Social Justice Art Show on Internal Landscapes: A Glimpse into Self Discovery. Which I asked Jason to help me out on this touchy subject. Due to the fact he knows much more on this field and from that I will be able to pull the artwork out of them.

Question: Have you ever brought in a guest artist, or partnered with someone outside of the school for a project? If so, how, and what was the outcome?

Yes I had other artist that I met at the Art Gallery Show or Loiasida.org that came in and did a mixed Media workshop and other ones too with my kids and the loved it. Kids were invited to art galleries in the community to see other arts of work. My kids love to have other artist come in to teach them something new or a different kind of art.

I see my students monday thru Friday. 1 hr a day but if the weather is great I take them out sketching and I make that a two hour trip. Time to get where we are going, look around for something great to sketch, I buy them pizza, and at the end give them time for fun maybe stop in a park on the way back to school, then I will top it off with Ice cream from the truck.