



SUPPORT TODAY. SUCCESS TOMORROW.

# Here & Now

A Newsletter from Leake & Watts



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## Supporting Whole Families

TWO PERSPECTIVES OF FOSTER CARE



“My kids are everything. Without them, I feel like I have nobody,” says 26-year-old Priscilla Ramirez, a single mother of three. She dotes on 5-year-old Leilani, 4-year-old Suki and little Yandel, who is just 18 months old. Dressed as Anna and Elsa from the popular movie *Frozen*, Leilani and Suki climb into Priscilla’s lap and Yandel snuggles up to his mother. The girls claim their mother’s attention to steal hugs and show her the games that they are playing. Seeing them together, you wouldn’t know that the family has recently gone through a difficult separation.



Priscilla Ramirez, a single mother of three, with her 18-month-old son Yandel.

Sixteen months ago, Priscilla was stressed. She was out of work, living in a homeless shelter and caring for three children. One night, there was an incident resulting in an injury to one of the girls. As a result, the children were removed from Priscilla and placed in foster care with Leake & Watts. It was difficult for the whole family. Focused on the well-being and safety of the children, our staff ensured that Leilani, Suki and Yandel were provided with comprehensive therapeutic supports while linked with a loving family member who served as their foster mother during the separation from Priscilla. “Being placed in foster care is really traumatic and disruptive for children, so we try to support them in as many ways as possible. This means ensuring that kids have everything from proper medical care and counseling to the opportunity to engage in recreational activities. For Leilani and Suki, we also made sure that they had consistent, nurturing preschool services so they could feel safe and secure in their daily routine,” says Priscilla’s Case Manager Khallia Powell-Morgan.

# LEAKE & WATTS

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## Honoring Rita Gross Nelson



*Illustrated plaque of Rita Gross Nelson on the Biondi High School Black History Wall of Fame, hand drawn by Biondi High School Art Teacher William Falcon.*



Biondi High School students, staff, and community members gathered to celebrate Black History month and to honor the late Rita Gross Nelson, inducting her into the school's Black History Wall of Fame. "Ms. Rita" overcame significant barriers on the road to joining the Air Force in the 1950s, and later became the first female African-American police officer and first female detective in Yonkers. After her retirement, she remained active as an advocate and a mentor to at-risk youth. She volunteered in Yonkers Public Schools, worked as the first female court liaison in Yonkers and spoke with court-involved teens at Leake & Watts' own Woodfield Cottage Secure Detention Program.

During the Black History Month Ceremony, Ms. Nelson's daughter Maria George encouraged all the students in attendance to pursue

their goals and dreams. "My mother used to say, your past doesn't matter. The future is whatever you make for yourself." Accepting several awards in honor of her mother from the Biondi School and other community organizations, Ms. George told the students, "You can be anything you want, but you have to make the future for yourself."

The Biondi School community chose Ms. Nelson for this award because the story of her perseverance was an inspiration to our students, many of whom have barriers to learning in conventional educational settings. "The odds were stacked against Rita Gross Nelson, but that didn't stop her," explains Leake & Watts Superintendent of Schools Dr. Don Antonecchia. "Her story says to students that they can be successful, too. That is our message every day."

The Biondi School established the Black History Wall of Fame in 2012 to commemorate Black History Month and honor local role models who have made significant contributions to our community. Prior honorees include New York State Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins; civil rights attorney Mayo Bartlett, co-founder of Safe Passage; and Biondi School Assistant Principal Al Grimes, who was a longtime principal in the Mount Vernon School District and a member of the first African-American college relay team to win the National Invitational Two Mile Event.





Guests at A Taste of Riverpark enjoy the tour of the onsite urban farm, located at Riverpark Restaurant along the East River.

## Spring Benefit Success



At **A Taste of Riverpark** on April 30th, supporters braved the chilly wind coming off the East River to take a tour of one of the largest urban farms in New York City. This was only one of the evening's highlights, which was a great fundraising success thanks to individual and corporate donors who gathered at Riverpark Restaurant for the farm-to-table fundraiser that directly benefitted the children, adults and families enrolled in Leake & Watts' community programs.

Beyond enjoying the superb food and farm tour, guests met young men from our Residential Treatment Center and learned about their experience in our Youth Gardening Program. Similar to the Riverpark Farm, our Gardening Program supports urban farms on our campus in Yonkers and at our Woodfield Cottage Program in Valhalla, where residents plant and cultivate a wide array of fruits and vegetables. The majority of the food produced by our Youth Gardeners is donated to the Food Bank for Westchester, providing over 12,000 servings of food for more than 1,500 food insecure families per year. The youth are proud to give back to the community in such a significant way. "I was impressed by the young men's knowledge of how food is grown and by how much they truly love working in the garden," says Crossan Seybolt, Secretary of the Leake & Watts Board of Directors, after speaking to several Youth Gardeners at the event. "They were very mature and it was clear that the program has inspired dedication to a project that is larger than themselves."

The true highlight of the event was when the evening's featured speaker Christian Hurtado, a teen from our Residential Treatment Center, shared his appreciation for the support that he has received from Leake & Watts. Christian explained that before he came to the agency, he had struggled to deal with his emotions and had been hospitalized several times. He also had a difficult relationship with his mother, but shared that things are now dramatically different. "I used to argue with my mom a lot and it's been difficult for her to accept who I am. It's been hard to try to get along with her, but my social worker talks to her a lot and has helped her understand me," he explained. Christian particularly emphasized the role that staff member Kristen Saunders and his Leake & Watts Mentor Betsy Pabon have played in helping him learn how to successfully manage his emotions and achieve success in school.

"As Christian spoke, you could tell that everyone in the room was moved. Many were moved to tears, in fact, as he shared how Leake & Watts has had such a positive impact on his life," says Associate Executive Director Belinda Conway. "When he hugged Kristen and Betsy, you could see the genuine connection between them. When staff, volunteers and donors all come together to support a young person like Christian, so many positive things are possible."



Top photograph: Executive Director Alan Mucatel introduces Andrew Maldonado, one of our Youth Gardeners, to A Taste of Riverpark guest Sergeant Rick Alaimo. Bottom photograph: Guest speaker Christian Hurtado, a teen from our Residential Treatment Center, hugs his Mentor Betsy Pabon and Leake & Watts Direct Support staff member Kristen Saunders.



## Connecting with Our Community



Members of the Yonkers Police Department and Westchester County Legislator Ken Jenkins have a great time with students from several of our programs.



### LET'S GROW TOGETHER: A PARTNERSHIP WITH THE YONKERS POLICE DEPARTMENT

Bringing youth and local police together so they can better learn about one another, *Let's Grow Together* is a partnership with the Yonkers Police Department. This unique initiative is designed to promote positive relationships between police officers and at-risk youth through joint participation in volunteer opportunities, workshops, picnics and holiday celebrations. The get-togethers are both enjoyable and educational, with police officers and youth sharing pizza and talking honestly about their perceptions of each other. The kick-off event was a ceremonial "First Planting" at the Leake & Watts Youth Garden in Yonkers, which provides food to hungry and food insecure individuals and families. "Our teens don't usually have much experience relating to community leaders one-on-one," explains Sue Sampogna, Leake & Watts Assistant Executive Director of Residential Services. "We want teens to build positive relationships with police officers and other public servants and to be inspired to be involved in their communities. *Let's Grow Together* helps teens connect with the community and the community to connect with them in a new way. By getting together regularly, the officers and our young people will grow to understand the challenges each group faces, and connect positively with each other."

The City of Yonkers is extremely excited about the growing partnership between the police department and Leake & Watts, and numerous officials came to the "First Planting" Ceremony and Picnic in order to show their support for the program. Guests included Yonkers Mayor Mike Spano, Yonkers Police Commissioner Charles Gardner, Police Captain Peter Butler of the Yonkers 3rd Precinct, Yonkers City Court Judge Michael Martinelli, Yonkers City Councilman Michael Sabatino, and Symra Brandon, Director of Community Affairs for State Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins.



### GET CAUGHT READING!

In May, we were excited to celebrate *Get Caught Reading Month* with a host of visitors at the Leake & Watts Ames, Brownell and Children's Learning Center preschools, our Head Start Program and Seabury Day Care, and our Biondi Elementary School. A national public service campaign designed to remind people of all ages how much fun it is to read, *Get Caught Reading Month* offered government officials a chance to read with our students, many of whom have special needs. When Westchester County Legislator Mike Kaplowitz read *The Little Red Hen* to children at the Ames Early Childhood Center, he involved the students in a game. Pointing to the pictures, the children were able to help him retell the story as he read to them and tell him which parts of the story were their favorites. NYC Councilman Andy King, who brought his favorite children's book about Martin Luther King Jr., was warmly welcomed by Kindergarten students at Biondi Elementary School. "When visitors read to the children, it reinforces the idea that reading and stories are something to get excited about," says Sharon Woods, Director of the Ames Center. But the events weren't only about reading, since the visitors sang with the children and spoke about their work, which has many benefits for our young students. "When adults come into their classroom and talk to them, children develop a special interest in the things that he or she talks about with them," explains Ms. Woods.

This year's 17 guest readers included New York State Assembly Members Marcos Crespo, Mark Gjonaj, Shelley Mayer and Gary Pretlow; New York City Council Members Andy King and Annabel Palma; Yonkers City Council Members Chris Johnson, Corazon Pineda, Michael Sabatino and Dennis Shepherd; Westchester County Legislators Catherine Borgia, Michael B. Kaplowitz, Ken Jenkins, Virginia Perez and Alfreda Williams; as well as several Legislative Aides.

*If you would like to become involved in reading to children, supporting the Let's Grow Together Program, mentoring teens at our Residential Treatment Center, or supporting other children and families in our programs, please contact our Manager of Volunteer Services **Jack Toone** at (914) 375-8794. There are dozens of opportunities to become involved at Leake & Watts!*

# SPRING & SUMMER at Leake & Watts



We enjoy celebrating spring and summer with pizzazz across our programs at Leake & Watts! Pictured here, students in our early childhood programs paint bird houses for Mother's Day and participate in Stepping Up Ceremonies. Meanwhile, teens from our Residential Treatment Center garden alongside officers from the Yonkers Police Department and individuals in our programs for adults with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities enjoy spring baseball.

## Tribute Gifts

If you would like to commemorate a special occasion or honor someone who has passed, we invite you to make an "In Honor of" or "In Memory of" gift. Your donation will support Leake & Watts programs while you pay tribute to someone who is important to you. Whomever you designate will receive a thoughtful card from us, letting them know that a gift has been made in their name. To do so, contact us at **914.375.8605** or [development@leakeandwatts.org](mailto:development@leakeandwatts.org) or visit us at [www.leakeandwatts.org/make-a-donation](http://www.leakeandwatts.org/make-a-donation).

### IN HONOR OF GIFTS

For: Maxine Jacobson  
By: Meredith Barber

For: Meredith Barber  
By: Michael Barber

For: Thomas & Elizabeth Renyi  
By: Bloomberg Philanthropies

For: James Henry Fitzsimmons  
By: Michael & Ilana Charette

For: Phoebe R. Stanton  
By: Frances Davis

For: Meredith Barber  
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For: Phoebe R. Stanton  
By: James & Kathleen Hogg

For: Alan Mucatel  
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By: Muriel Hyman

For: Meredith Barber  
By: Maxine Jacobson

For: Gerald & Agnes Hassell  
By: Maya Manley

For: James Henry Fitzsimmons  
By: Andrea Markowicz

For: James Henry Fitzsimmons  
By: Catherine Mason

For: Robert Doherty & Salon 421  
By: Catherine Mason

For: Jessica Leistra & Matt Safron  
By: Jim & Gail Mitchell

For: Alan Mucatel  
By: Beth Mucatel & Lou Terminello

For: Elinor Ratner  
By: David R. Ratner

For: James Henry Fitzsimmons  
By: Linda Rosenthal

For: Judy Schneider  
By: Clare Schneider

For: James Henry Fitzsimmons  
By: Jeremy & Lauren Schultz

For: Jessica Leistra & Matt Safron  
By: Jeremy & Lauren Schultz

For: James Henry Fitzsimmons  
By: Jack Toone

For: David Warner  
By: Gary Warner

### IN MEMORY OF GIFTS

For: Frances Davis  
By: Frances Dennie Davis

For: Luisito Cuevas, Jr.  
By: Andrea Diaz

For: James Egan  
By: Harry & Marlene Egan

For: Dr. Patricia G. Morisey  
By: Family Residences Executive Team

For: Andrew Gilenson  
By: Robin Gilenson

For: Evelyn C. Hooper  
By: William Hooper

For: Vernon Carpenter  
By: Kenneth Johnsen & Stephanie Leszczynski-Johnsen

For: Francis Guy  
By: Patricia Joseph

For: Karl & Rosalind Madsen  
By: Harold Madsen & Rosalind Iversen

For: Joan Mazor  
By: George & Barbara Mazor

For: Dr. Patricia G. Morisey  
By: Nora Schaaf

For: Gordon Stanton  
By: Nora Schaaf

For: Elaine Ball  
By: Jeremy & Lauren Schultz

For: Brandon Shepherd  
By: Jeremy & Lauren Schultz

For: Edward T. Roth  
By: George Roth & Cheryl Raney

For: Marcellus White  
By: Marvin F. White





Foster care agencies like Leake & Watts don't only support children in foster care. We also provide significant support to birth parents to help them address the challenges they face so that they can support their children. These services and supports include helping parents fulfill court-ordered requirements and addressing substance abuse and domestic violence issues. Whenever possible, the goal is to reunite children with their birth parents. Studies show that children have more positive long term outcomes when they can be reunited with their families, as long as they can remain safe and supported.

When her children were placed in foster care, Priscilla was devastated. She felt powerless and overwhelmed by anger. She didn't know what to do, although she was willing to do whatever was necessary to get her children back. "They are my world, my life, my everything," she explains. "I would do anything for them."

With the support of Leake & Watts, Priscilla soon learned that there was a great deal she could do to regain custody of her children. In Priscilla's case, the Family Court judge felt she needed mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment and parenting training. Leake & Watts staff helped her in obtaining these services and provided direct one-to-one support as Priscilla fully dedicated herself to the long term return of her children.

"Priscilla showed up to every visit and session on time, every time. She was determined to get on her feet and rebuild a relationship with her children," says Debra McCall, Leake & Watts Director of Family Foster Care. "It's hard for parents who face so many challenges in their lives to stay on track perfectly as they often feel hopeless or overwhelmed. Priscilla's 100% commitment is a real demonstration of strength and character, and especially of her love for her children."

Priscilla was able to move from supervised to unsupervised visits with her children relatively quickly. Then Leilani, Suki and Yandel were able to move back in with their mother this past spring. Leading up to the family's reunion, Ms. Powell-Morgan helped Priscilla to find an apartment in Staten Island so that the children could keep attending the same preschool and be

close to other community supports that had become a part of their lives. "The day they moved into the apartment together, I was so happy for them. It just felt so good to see them together and on a new path," says Ms. Powell-Morgan.

While Priscilla successfully engaged in services, sought support and adhered to Court requirements, some parents have a longer road ahead of them before they are able to be reunited with their children. "Each family situation is different and many are very complex. We make sure that every child and parent gets the specific support they need," says Ms. McCall.

For example, fifteen-year-old Gabby was placed in Foster Care with Leake & Watts when both of her parents were incarcerated. During this time, Gabby's family faces a longer period of separation. Gabby and her younger brother Dominic were placed in Hyacinth's foster home. Although their parents are incarcerated, Hyacinth and Case Manager Shavonne Taylor encourage Gabby and Dominic to have ongoing contact with both their mother and their father so that the children have consistency in their lives. Gabby and Dominic talk on the phone with both parents several times a week. "Sometimes my mom and I talk every day," says Gabby. "I tell her about the books that I'm reading and the things that we're doing in class, and she tells me how her day is going."

Although Gabby and Dominic are very happy in Hyacinth's home, they look forward to being reunited with their father. "Gabby has always been a daddy's girl," says Foster Care Supervisor Miriam Rosenberg-Sica. "It is in Gabby and Dominic's best interest to be reunited with their father once he is again able to care for them." While in prison, Gabby's father has been able to attend counseling, parenting skills training and obtain his GED. Ms. Taylor will work with him as he is released later this year to help him acquire stable housing and a job. We will make sure the children are safe and can be supported by their father, and we will work with the family and Hyacinth in order to ease the transition back to his care.

In addition to staying in touch with their mom and dad, Hyacinth and Ms. Taylor make sure the children are connected to



*Priscilla Ramirez's oldest daughter Leilani.*

other family as well. Gabby and Dominic visit their grandparents in Brooklyn and their Aunt and Uncle on Long Island. "At my aunt's house, we bake together, play soccer, rake leaves, plant things in the garden, and just spend a lot of time outside. My aunt likes to keep us busy," explains Gabby.

As a teen in care and a mother who has had her children placed in foster care, Gabby and Priscilla have very different perspectives. Yet, they agree that getting help is what will lead their families to a better situation. "I want to live with my father someday. I know that will be hard," says Gabby. "I have a lot of good memories with him. I'm really glad that he is getting the help he needs."

Priscilla agrees that both the initial support that she received from Leake & Watts while separated from her children and the ongoing support have been critical. Regaining custody of Leilani, Suki and Yandel was a longer process, including a series of supervised-to-independent visits, guidance from her Case Manager and support from others in attaining her goals. Skill building workshops were immensely helpful. "It's fantastic — I have them all home with me now," says Priscilla. "It's hard, but I had to do it for my kids. Put my whole heart and power into it for them. I just kept thinking how happy this will make them."

## A Special Partnership

VOLUNTEERS FROM THE COLLEGE OF MOUNT SAINT VINCENT MAKE A DIFFERENCE ACROSS LEAKE & WATTS



“The students from the College of Mount Saint Vincent (CMSV) are good, positive people,” says Denise Dookie, a resident in one of Leake & Watts’ group homes for adults with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities. “They have been really nice to help us out with a bunch of activities, and they are good role models.”

Denise is one of many individuals in the Leake & Watts community who have been positively impacted by volunteers from CMSV. With their campus right next door to our Yonkers campus, we have formed a special partnership with the school. “We’re always looking for opportunities to involve young people because they bring so much creativity and vitality,” explains Jack Toone, the Leake & Watts Manager of Volunteer Services.

CMSV students have gotten particularly involved in our programs for adults with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), hosting a Special Olympics Basketball Clinic and helping with social events. We have formed a singing group that brings together CMSV students and individuals with I/DD, and volunteers have worked with individuals in our programs to paint murals. “It was really nice of the students to come and help us with the Mardi Gras party,” explains Denise. “Our house was hosting the party, and the college students helped us with the food so that we could dance and have fun for part of the time, and they were dancing with us too.” A group from CMSV also visits residents at Campbell House and they do fun activities such as decorating cupcakes, playing cards and singing karaoke.

According to Lilia Parks, the Leake & Watts Assistant Director of Residential Services for Adults with I/DD, “These students get up and get involved, and that really helps our residents connect with them.” Their willing spirit and enthusiasm inspires individuals like Denise. “I’m getting my GED right now,” explains Denise, “And getting to know the college students has made me want to finish school and be a better person.”



CMSV students also tutor at our Biondi Special Education High School and have even joined our Mentoring Program for at-risk teens at our Residential Treatment Center. This past spring, tutors focused on preparing teens for their Regents exams. “They weren’t just helping us learn facts,” explains Shytisha, an eleventh grader who was taking the Living Environments Regents Exam. “They took the time to explain,” says Cassandra, another student. “If they felt like we didn’t understand, they would go over it again, then help us put our answers into complete sentences.”

“My favorite thing that we’ve done with the college students is the Basketball Clinic,” says Denise. “My cousins taught me how to play basketball when I was little and I love it. Now I get to play sometimes with the college students one-on-one, but it made me really happy to play with a bunch of students all at once. I already signed up to participate in more Olympics events and that’s really giving me something to look forward to.”

“Volunteers like the CMSV students really enrich our programming,” says Mr. Toone. “We are always looking for volunteers from other schools, community organizations, corporations and the community in general so that we can continue to widen the opportunities for the children and families that we support.”

## 2015 Back to School Wish List

Summer is already here and all of our kids will be back in school before we know it! Your donation will support children across our programs in establishing a strong foundation that will help them for years to come!

### SCHOOL SUPPLIES & BOOKS

- Backpacks – suggested \$20 donation per child
- Composition Notebooks – suggested \$25 donation per classroom
- Educational games for our early childhood classrooms – suggested \$30 donation
- New books for our classroom libraries – suggested \$50 donation
- Preschool Physical Therapy Equipment – suggested \$150 donation

### TECHNOLOGY NEEDS

- Educational Software and Ebooks for Classroom Computers – suggested \$40 donation per classroom
- iPads (new or gently used) for our special education classrooms – \$400 each
- Desktop computers and software for classrooms at the Brownell School – \$1,000 each
- Smart boards for our special education elementary, middle and high school classrooms – \$6,000 each

If you would like to help fund any of these items, please contact the Leake & Watts Development Office at [development@leakeandwatts.org](mailto:development@leakeandwatts.org) or 914.375.8605.



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