

Lakewood High: The pearl in the oyster bed: Frank

Steve Frank Published 10:09 a.m. ET Sept. 25, 2018 | Updated 4:00 p.m. ET Sept. 25, 2018

“I don’t want to leave,” said Dante. He’s a senior at Lakewood High School.

“I don’t want to leave,” echoed Paris. She’s also a senior.

“I don’t want to leave,” offered Mr. Surgent; so did Mrs. Elbree and Mr. Salguero. Mrs. Marshall told me, “I don’t want to leave.” Dante and Paris will have to; they’ll graduate. The others are teachers, and so they get to stay — for as long as they want: after school, on weekends, in the summer. Mrs. Marshall’s the principal; her day never ends anyway.

Lakewood High, whose student body is 88 percent Hispanic, is not an average school. It’s the crown jewel that has gone unnoticed. It’s under the radar like the kids that go there. It’s “Cheers” without the booze: “A place where everybody knows your name.”

While their neighbors proudly point to their success with the popular metrics of the day (PARCC scores, SAT’s, graduation rates, college admissions), Lakewood will have to make due with a more elusive goal: learning! Yasmin’s learned. When she gets off the school bus at 6:30 every morning, she’s learned to smile. How do you measure that? Mrs. Riordan brings PB&J sandwiches in for the kids that get stuck after school for practice, or extra help, or because they don’t want to go home. How do you measure that? Coach Clark ferries some of his football players home every day after practice. Some of them don’t even have a home. Still he drops them off at a house. How do you measure that?

The building is stacked with teachers so beyond the pale. Peer into any classroom — calm, attentive silence. Where are the troublemakers? Where is the lack of order and respect that teachers universally complain about? Where are the confrontations? Not in these classes (of course, nothing is 100 percent). It’s almost as if these were college classes with a captive audience. And why not?



Teacher Samuel Salguero works with student Paris Mears, 17, on her album in the Recording Arts class. (Photo: Correspondent)

Walk into Mr. Salguero's audio-engineering "fantasy land" where dreams come true. Twenty-two keyboard/computer stations where kids learn (in stage 1) to read music and to compose music and lyrics, and by stage 4 to mix it on a master station and actually record it in a sound booth. Paris now has her own YouTube channel and Jo-el his own Sound-Cloud. Kevin gets accompanied by an aide from his Special Needs Program. He has multiple disabilities. He will never play the keyboard, but today he found his seat by himself and he put his microphones on by himself. And he is part of a mainstream class if even for just one period. In Mr. Salgueros's world, there's a place for everyone.

Mr. Salguero doesn't have to teach. He's a musician, a composer, a sound engineer. He does it because he loves it. Just like Mr. Conroy, a culinary chef who gets to combine his love of cooking with his love of kids. They used to call it Home Ec, but that was before they sautéed chicken marsala in fresh sauce, made pizza from fresh dough and catered entire events. Thursday night they'll prepare and serve chicken parmigiana at a fundraiser. Mr. C's not prepping them to be homemakers, he's setting them up for a career.

Lakewood is a strange world. Every week seems to bring a new scandal as if it were an ongoing soap opera. Too big to be a town, too small to be a city, it's more of a sprawling patchwork of hastily built upscale subdivisions. But amidst all this new construction breathes a vulnerable subset of society. Predominantly Hispanics, many of them keep house in run-down brick apartment complexes of another lifetime, now infested with gangs, drugs and danger, or in the neglected two-bedroom hovels that harbor two or three or even four families. This is where many of the Lakewood public school students spend their nights. Weekdays some of them escape to the safety and sanctuary of their schools.



Welcome to Lakewood High (Photo: Steve Frank)

Jovanni wakes up. There is no clock. He bolts down the crumbling concrete steps, past the unmowed lawn, through the rusty chain-link fence, over the piled up mattresses and broken bicycles rotting on the curb, and makes it to the bus stop — not on time. There's no one to drive him. No one to call. So he walks. He walks and gets to school just in time to miss the bus for vocational school. Instinctively he goes to the one person he can always count on, Mr. Orellana, his guidance counselor.

And that is the world of the Lakewood student. Seven years ago, there were 45 teenage pregnancies in the high school. That's when Mrs. Bradley-Askush initiated the Pregnant Prevention Program. She carefully recruits seniors who get trained to counsel and work with the 8th and 9th graders. Last year they were down to 10.



Paris Mears, 17, a senior, works on her album in the Recording Arts class (Photo: Correspondent)

It's a school in a constant state of adaptation. After-school detention had to be scrapped because so many of these kids work after school. How do you tell a kid to skip his shift at Wawa, the bagel shop, a nursing home or some other job they labor at until 2 in the morning? So Mrs. Marshall, so innovative and compassionate, agreed to an "in-lunch" detention. The problem kids are rounded up before their lunch period and escorted to a detention room where a bag lunch is waiting for them. Such a simple solution; makes one wonder — "How come no one ever thought of this before?"



Horticulture teacher Brian Surgent instructs students on different types of plants. (Photo: Correspondent)

One class where there's never a problem is in Mr. Surgent's horticulture program. Talking to Mr. Surgent, last year's teacher-of-the-year, is like one-on-one with some brilliant mad scientist. His energy and passion for plants pulls you into the enchanting world of botany. The night-blooming cirrus flower opens for just one night and then it's gone. Pumpkin vines will follow the sun. Peanuts grow underground. His excitement is infectious. He can't stop talking. You can't stop listening. One of his kids, Jose, by everyone's account, was a thug. He found a celosia plant growing in the gravel of the greenhouse floor. It would die there. Jose dug it out, pruned it and planted it in one of the many gardens. It blossomed. Now Jose tends to it every day and the world has one less thug.



TV Production teacher Mario Cuniglio instructs students in the TV studio at Lakewood High. (Photo: Correspondent)

I left my visit to LHS in awe of what they've accomplished and amazed by the resilience of these kids. How did this come to be? As Mrs. Bradley-Askush explained, "Before Marcy (Mrs. Marshall) came, it was a nightmare." She is the heartbeat of that school. Now, in the middle of that oyster bed of despair they call Lakewood, there lives a shiny white pearl: they're called the "Piners." And I don't want to leave.

Steve Frank is a columnist for the Asbury Park Press. He is on Facebook at Frankly Speaking. Have a column idea? Email him at snfrank@verizon.net.