

Michael Struening
The Trentonian
June 14, 2007

On Thursday, Michael Meisberger will stand up in front of his high school class and do something he never thought he would – graduate.

At his old high school in Ewing, Meisberger was classified as an outcast, a troublemaker. He was the class clown who sat in the back of the class and never did his work.

“I was a regular bad kid,” he said. “Just because I like making class interesting. I like making people laugh. I like the feeling I get from it.”

Then three years ago, a suggestion from an aid at his after school program led Meisberger, now 18, from Ewing High School to the Thomas J. Rubino Academy in West Windsor.

The academy, tucked away on Mercer County Community College’s campus, is an alternative high school, whose goal according to their website is to “assist students who are experiencing difficulties in the traditional school environment.”

This year, the Rubino Academy will graduate 37 seniors; 100 percent of a class made of up kids who few thought would ever make it.

Of course, not everyone in the school is like Meisberger. Some are worse. One student missed over 100 days of class at his public school in 2005-2006. Since coming to the Rubino Academy this year, he’s missed none. But what created the change?

“I like it here,” he offers.

And after talking to many of the 89 students at the academy (one short of its capacity), you come to realize that something different is going on here. This is a school full of children cast away by one of Mercer County’s 12 public schools. By all accounts, this is their last chance in the public system.

Yet this alternative high school isn’t just there to spit out diplomas. This year between 65 and 70 percent will go on to higher education. Another ten percent will enter the armed forces. Of the 24 students required to take New Jersey’s High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), 17 passed. And those who didn’t went through the Special Review Assessment, to ensure they meet comparable standards - just like any other student. Rarely does the academy meet a student who it can’t help.

“It works,” said Stephen Pagano Sr., the school’s part time director.

Pagano estimates that it was about 12 years ago when he founded Comprehensive Education Resources (CER). Originally the company was designed to offer education resources such as tutoring and child study services.

In 1996, CER was successful in receiving the bid to administer Mercer County's then faltering alternative education program. When they took over the Rubino academy, CER had only 11 students to work with.

Since then school has been near or at full capacity every school year.

"And there's always a waiting list," said Pagano Sr.'s son Steve Pagano Jr.

With his father semi-retired, Pagano Jr., the president of CER handles much of the school's day-to-day operations. Under his tutelage, Pagano Jr. has constantly changed the program to comply with state regulations. The school's newest challenge was to lengthen its school day an extra hour – now lasting from 8:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.

While acts like No Child Left Behind have forced the school to constantly adapt, nearly all of their principles have stood in tact since the start.

"What we try to do is provide an environment different than their public high schools," Pagano Jr. said.

From the administration to the students, everyone at the Rubino Academy points to one reason why it works.

"We couldn't do this without our staff," Pagano Jr. emphasized during a day spent with the academy.

Nine years ago, the school brought in Lonnie Burgess. Burgess used to be the superintendent for the Department of Corrections, but came on board when the school made him "an offer (he) couldn't refuse." What Burgess brought along with him was a model called Guided Group Interaction (GGI).

Following this model, the Rubino Academy has given "empowerment to the students," as described by program co-coordinator Henry Kreczkowski.

Kreczkowski, who came to the school eight years ago, along with Burgess, have helped to implement and establish the Rubino Academy's current system.

Burgess likens the GGI model to interaction in the armed services.

"In the army, if you screw up, your whole platoon has to do pushups," he said.

That's sort of what they've done at the Rubino Academy. Every student is held responsible not just for his actions, but for the actions of his classmates as well.

Meisberger said that was a big part of what helped him to “fall in line.” When he acted out in class in his public school in Ewing he would be kicked out and forced to explain himself to a principal or vice principal he barely knew. At the Rubino academy, he’d be held accountable for his actions by not only his teachers, but by 10-15 of his peers.

“They’re like dude what’s the problem,” Meisberger said. “They’ll tell you to stop. They give you a dose of reality.”

The teachers, who are all referred to by their first names, also spend a great deal of time listening to their students needs. A big part of why the Rubino Academy works is because they allow teaching and counseling to go hand-in-hand.

“We have to listen to our kids cries before we deal with their problems,” Burgess said.

“It’s unstructured structure,” added Kreczkowski.

Part of the schools therapy system has been to implement a guided group therapy sessions where students bring up their problems and decide amongst themselves which to discuss.

“Sometimes it’s easier for kids to talk to each other about what goes on in their lives,” Pagano Jr. said

The school only has a staff of about 13, but teachers will confront any problems that arise. While at public schools, these students often fall through the cracks, teachers at the Rubino Academy will take the time to sit with a student and discuss what’s bothering them.

“Negative behavior has to be confronted here 100 percent of the time,” Burgess said. “Most schools only do it 50 percent to a quarter of the time.”

Under the GGI system, the school has also implemented what they call “norms,” rather than rules. Pagano Jr. likened it to driving on a highway.

“The speed limit might be 65 miles per hour, but you and I drive 70,” he said.

The school’s norms, like “you show up to class” and “you do your work,” seem silly. But to a student who has been cast out of his school for behavior problems, the norms help to create a structured culture.

“I never had trouble showing up here because it was just different,” one student said.

The students stressed that one big change in coming to the Rubino Academy was that everyone seemed to care. The teachers weren’t like any teacher most students have had. At their annual bar-b-q, Kreczkowski left briefly with a student to go to the student’s

home and get spices for the burgers. When one teacher went to Boston recently, he came back with a Red Sox cap for Meisberger, an avid Sox fan.

“We create an environment that feels like family,” Pagano Jr. said.

The academy started with just a small grant from Hamilton Township, but has grown into a safe haven for students from all over Mercer County.

“This is one of the only places where you can have a white kid from Princeton with as much status as a black kid from Trenton,” Burgess said.

With graduation approaching, Meisberger and many other students reflected on the paths that brought them here. Black and white, rich and poor, no matter the situation, most of the students agreed that the academy had changed their lives.

“Here there’s a million of me,” Meisberger said. “We’re all different, but we’re all the same. We’re all here for a reason.”