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a place



to thrive

New Hope Academy offers a supportive environment and education to meet the needs of every child.

by **LEIGH STUART** photography by **JODY ROBINSON**

For more than 30 years, Kathleen Rosso-Gana has dedicated her life to educating and uplifting adolescents for whom so-called “traditional” school environments just didn’t work.

“Kids come to us for many reasons,” says Rosso-Gana, the founder, president, and executive director of Motivational Educational Training Company Inc. and New Hope Academy. “When I founded New Hope Academy, I wanted to create a place where any child who was not thriving in a traditional setting for whatever reason can find their place.”

Boasting a two-to-one ratio of students to adult leaders at its Yardley and Doylestown campuses, New Hope Academy offers a tightly woven support network grounded in the philosophy, “Head and Heart Before the Brain.” In other words, the school values not just a student’s education, but also the student’s

psychosocial and emotional development.

“Many of our students come to us with a unique heartache, headache, or issue,” she says. “This is one reason we seek to add joy to children’s lives. Children with nothing to lose are very dangerous people. From the beginning, we talk a lot. We meet with parents, teachers, administrators, to try to find out what’s happening with a child so we can try to fix it.”

The past 12 months have brought a host of challenges no one could have foreseen. As an adaptive learning environment, however, Rosso-Gana employed the creativity of each member of her team to meet challenges as they came.

“We had to create the same philosophy and motivational environment online that we have here at school,” Rosso-Gana says. “Talking to a computer is very different than the human energy our students were used to in the building. We’ve had kids tell us, ‘I don’t like this,’ or, ‘It’s too hard,’ but our counselors have been talking to as many kids as possible. And kids would get frustrated; they’d want to give up. We had to find a way to motivate them and remind them that this is temporary, and this will all end someday.”

“Last March was rough,” adds Tim Simmons, director of technology and media at New Hope Academy. “The entire educational world had to pivot to virtual. We had to adapt, but within two weeks we were up and running.”

Tiffany Trunell, director of pupil services for the Yardley campus, says New Hope Academy worked diligently on engagement initiatives to bridge the gap between the online world and the classroom.

“A lot of kids are here for social or emotional issues, and COVID stopped a lot of activities,”



once more, the environment would be as safe as possible. The school has met all requirements set by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Doing so may have come at great expense, but Rosso-Gana says the school wanted to “do it right.”

“Sometimes a student is really struggling at home, really isolated, and this makes it even more important to keep that child anchored into a school community,” says Trunell. “I feel that’s a really big thing for them—feeling like they’re connected, like they’re part of a community, and that they’ve found that place here.”

“A lot of our kids have gone back to in-person lessons,” says David Kennedy, director of the Yardley campus. “This allows us to have a good working relationship with the kids, but virtual learning has been very effective as well. Everyone has gotten more tech savvy, but we’ve also had

to realize that no matter what the platform, we have to make learning effective for the kids.”

Casey Barut, director of pupil services for the Doylestown campus, points out that staff haven’t just been working hard to uplift students, but also one another.

“Just like kids need a community, so does our staff,” Barut says. “We had to lean on each other as a team and trust in the philosophy and model that Kathy has built. It was a challenge for us all, but I think this resonated with the kids, too—we were experiencing being human right along with them. Whether it’s listening to music or going for a walk, we talked about real-world strategies.

“That’s the New Hope Academy motto: ‘Head and Heart Before the Brain,’” she continues. “We built ourselves on that and work to listen and work through a child’s issue, and build their resilience and trust with us.”

Above all, Rosso-Gana believes New Hope Academy’s greatest asset is the foundation of hope upon which the school is built.

“I’ve been working with teens since I was a teen myself, and I love it,” she says. “We try to help kids learn in a joyful environment. That joy is as important as food, shelter, and clothing. Adolescence can be a down, dark age, and these kids need to look forward to something.” ■

Trunell says. “But once the activities resumed, any time we had an in-person event at the school, like the Halloween parade, we would also use Google Meet to include the virtual students as well.”

“So much was taken away from these kids, so as an administrator, I’ve been reaching out to a lot of students and families to keep up that connection,” shares Colleen Kaufmann, dean of students for the Doylestown campus. “I think the kids felt robbed, so we did everything we could to help them feel special.”

This included making signs and having drive-by visits with graduating seniors. The school also held four separate mini-graduation ceremonies so each child could enjoy his or her moment in the sun.

“We go the extra mile,” Rosso-Gana says. “Where some teachers are feeling worn or tired, we keep a high energy in the building and work together.”

Feeling Connected

At present, students have the option to attend classes virtually or in person. Rosso-Gana invested in sanitization and air-purifying technology so students could attend in person

We go the extra mile.”

— **Kathleen Rosso-Gana,**
New Hope Academy



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