

Passion and perseverance: HSAS grad Holly Welfel finds her calling

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For students working toward a Human Services degree, establishing a program or agency is a shining but often distant dream.

SUNY Broome alumna Holly Welfel, however, defied the odds and started [OASIS](#), an after-school program for teens in [Endicott](#). Eight years after its founding, the program is still going strong – as is Holly Welfel, now working on a master’s degree in social work at Binghamton University while providing the resource building and vision work that fuel OASIS.

“Everybody has a dream, but not many people act on it,” said Welfel, noting the importance of perseverance and passion. “That’s why OASIS after school has grown; it’s not just a room with equipment and activities in it. Those are my kids and I love them. Eventually, people will get excited and follow it as well. Once you’re there, there’s an overwhelming sense of family.”



Holly Welfel, lower left, with students in OASIS.



Struggle and common ground

The teens who shoot hoops, create art and work on their homework at OASIS may not realize that they have a good deal in common with the organization's founder.

Like many of them, Welfel grew up in a low-income household that didn't have the resources to pay for extracurricular activities. She admits that she likely made bad decisions, as many teens do, and felt that she had no one to talk to.

She did learn the importance of higher education as a child, when she accompanied her mother to a SUNY Broome night class with Professor Margherita Rossi – a figure who would later prove a significant mentor in Welfel academic life. And while finances were tight, forgoing college was out of the question.

"My mom said, 'You're going to college. It's your only ticket out of here,'" Welfel said.

She began her SUNY Broome journey in 1999, with a focus on early childhood education and an aim to become a special education teacher. But meaningful encounters with professors Rossi and Dr. Thomas Crandell, Executive Vice President Francis Battisti and others led to her decision to switch to Human Services.

Academics didn't come easily; Welfel struggled and was hesitant to speak in class, due to a stutter and a bit of anxiety. But she stayed the course and ultimately succeeded, transferring to Binghamton University to work on her bachelor's degree in human development. She earned her bachelor's degree in 2005 – and then transferred some of the credits back to complete her associate's degree at SUNY Broome, a process known as reverse transfer.

"This is part of the journey I took: I received a bachelor's degree before I receive my associate's," she said.

Today, she shares her academic struggles with OASIS' interns and volunteers, many of whom are SUNY Broome students facing their own challenges. It's important for students to realize that goals aren't easily achieved and that challenges are an integral part of their life's journey.

"I struggled just like everyone else is," she said.

Professor Rossi said she was humbled that Welfel considers her a mentor. In academic settings, one common story involves a professor or teacher who affects or changes a student's life. However, professors also have students who make a difference in their lives, she noted.

"Having had a student like Holly reminds me that our encounters with students – in and out of the classroom – are full of possibility. We can't make a difference in every student's life. But we should be prepared, ready to seize the moment and believe that we can make a difference in small, or more significant, ways," Rossi said. "I bring Holly and her success story to mind whenever I question why I teach and if what I do has meaning."

Staff and students in the OASIS after school program in Endicott

The power of perseverance

The roots of OASIS, Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer Francis Battisti remembered, came from a class project.

“She had such a passion to make a positive impact on people,” he said, remembering Welfel as a student.

Circumstances aligned in 2006, giving Holly Welfel a start on her life’s work. A friend who belonged to a local church wrote a successful grant proposal to establish a youth outreach program in Endicott, and asked Welfel to take the lead. While she had never started such a program before, she took the leap.

On the very first day, Welfel remembers walking into an empty room, uncertain as to what her next steps should be. OASIS’ early days had their difficult moments, and Welfel spent a few days in the teen center alone and in tears. But she pushed on, hiring staff, partnering with the Boys & Girls Club of Western Broome and Union-Endicott schools, and making her program a fixture in the community.

“What made OASIS get off the ground: I am very persevering,” she explained. “I don’t take no as an answer. No just might mean no right now. Our kids need the programming; they need us.”

The program’s daily attendance averages around 30 teens, although it can spike up to 50 and numbers often depend on the weather and school breaks. Teens attend voluntarily, mostly learning of the program through their friends as well as Union-Endicott’s guidance office.

“We get an average about 200 students a year that come through our doors. They know it’s a safe place,” Welfel said. “Just because our program ends at 6 p.m. doesn’t mean that’s when I’m done. I help them outside the

program; I'm kind of like the mom of a lot of teenagers."

They meet in the Boys & Girls Club of Western Broome's Teen Center, located next to Union-Endicott High School, where they can grab a snack and take part in a variety of programs. They have time dedicated to goal development, academic excellence and college exploration, called Club XL, as well as workshops that promote mental and physical development as well as civic engagement. These can include such diverse activities as art, dance, basketball, Frisbee and helping out in the community.

Current civic engagement efforts include partnering with the Red Cross for an international humanitarian law campaign. The teens also help serve a community Thanksgiving dinner, put on the annual haunted house at the Boys & Girls Club and participate in the annual Endicott holiday parade.

"I encourage ideas of giving back and being a part of the community," Welfel said.

The teens form bonds with each other that carry over into the school day and, hopefully, beyond. Welfel and OASIS staff promote a sense of family and interconnectedness with one another. Those bonds persist even beyond adolescence, as former students return from their colleges or jobs to tell their life stories or volunteer. Sometimes, they bring their children, younger siblings or cousins.

OASIS at the Endicott Holiday Parade

The Future

As OASIS continues to develop, Welfel's own role is shifting. She has less hands-on time with the teens and more with her staff and interns, as she shifts to a more administrative position as OASIS' founding director. She is also nearly two years into her work on her master's degree in social work, and will be doing an internship of her own at SUNY Broome in an effort to complete her degree.

The changes are bittersweet in some ways, since she enjoys working with the program's teens. However, she also finds her new role to be highly rewarding.

"Now I'm working with staff and interns and I get just as excited," she said. "It's amazing to see how you can inspire young adults. I can inspire the young adults working bedside me."

As with many nonprofits, funding can be an ongoing challenge. OASIS originally began under the Lincoln Avenue Baptist Church in Endicott, funded by a five-year grant through the New York Department of Family and Child Services that ended in 2012. During that period, OASIS held a stakeholders meeting for the local community, showcasing student artwork and drawing local residents, school officials and elected officials such as Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo.

Welfel, in the process of applying for another five-year grant, met with the executive directors of area organizations that serve youth and the community. OASIS decided to apply under the Family & Children's Society and move the organization under the Binghamton-area nonprofit's aegis. The program has received another state grant that runs until 2017.

Going forward, Welfel is looking at different ways to sustain the organization and diversify its funding sources. Because OASIS centers on the concept of community, she also has reached out to the faith-based community of Endicott as well as SUNY Broome's Center for Civic Engagement and student organizations.

For Holly Welfel, the word "community" is the most important part of SUNY Broome Community College's name and the heart of its essence. Community lies at the center of all she does with OASIS and, overall, her identity as a whole.

"The people I encounter at the college have that sense of community. They're from the community and they're invested here, and I feel I'm invested here on this campus," she said. "I just get such a wonderful sense of community here and I believe in SUNY Broome."

By sharing her experiences and serving as a role model, Welfel also helps to inspire the next generation of Hornets and Human Services students: she shows that passion and perseverance can lead to both personal and career success.

"She's an example of the Broome story," Vice President Battisti said.

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