

Cyberbullying expert joins Huntington schools

By Arlene Gross

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Just as one elementary school says goodbye to its principal, another district welcomes an addition to its administration.

Barbara Lacey comes to the Huntington schools on July 1, with an annual salary of \$157,000, to serve as the district's assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, leaving her post at the helm of the West Side School in Cold Spring Harbor schools on June 27. Lacey replaces Michael O'Brien, the interim administrator who took over when Margaret Evers vacated it to become principal of Jefferson Primary School. O'Brien, whose last day is June 30, said he plans to retire.

"My lifelong professional mission has been the education of the whole child," Lacey said. "I look forward with great excitement and enthusiasm to continuing that mission in the Huntington School District."

An 18-year resident of Centerport, Dr. Lacey has served as West Side's principal since 2000. Prior to that, she served as principal for Terryville Road Elementary School in Comsewogue from 1998 to 2000 and Staten Island Academy from 1995 to 1998.

"Ever since I could remember, since I was a very young child, I always wanted to be a teacher," Lacey said. "It was my dream, my goal, to help children with their development ... I think teachers are born, truly. It's their compass in life and they always have that inside of them."

Upon reflection years later, Lacey realized she was influenced by Ms. Walbrecht, her fifth-grade teacher at Our Redeemer Lutheran School in Seaford.

"She was kind, compassionate," Lacey recalled. "She was a true servant leader in her own way.... The kids were always engaged and happy, and I had such a connection with her, I always knew I wanted to be a teacher after that."

Walbrecht created a sense of community by treating everyone as a unique learner, Lacey said.

"You never felt that you were out of place or not accepted," she said. "And so the environment or the culture she developed was one of inclusion... No matter what type of learner you were, you could succeed and feel good about yourself."

Walbrecht's methodology, Lacey said, helped children achieve both academically and emotionally. "She made going to school a wonderful experience. I wanted to be just like that."

From that momentous class, Lacey carved out a lifetime in education, whether working at summer camps, teaching swimming, presiding over Sunday school, earning an undergraduate degree in elementary education and a master's in administration and supervision or serving as teacher, assistant principal, director of learning or principal.

While working on her doctorate on cyber bullying, Lacey presented "Bullying in Today's Society" at the National School Psychologist's Convention in Hauppauge in 2004 and received her doctorate in education three years later.

As part of her dissertation, "Social Aggression: A Study of Internet Harassment," Lacey conducted a year-long study of 700 students, grades five through eight, and parent workshops.

"A lot of kids who are victims then become bullies," she said. "That was outstanding from my study."

As a principal at West Side, Lacey addressed cyber bullying in workshops with children because, she claims that with children communicating via the Internet and cell phones, that form of harassment — which starts as early as fourth grade — is on the rise.

"A lot of times by the time kids get to eighth grade, they have their computers in their own room," she said, "so the parents aren't watching over them as much as they might or should."

If the issue comes to the table in Huntington schools, Lacey said she would use her expertise. "There have not been a great deal of studies in this area," she remarked. "So I could certainly be a resource in that area."

Parents, she warned, need to identify if their children are getting into trouble with cyber bullying. At the West Side School, she said, "I worked diligently to put together a booklet for parents on what it is: the definitions, how it's done, the symbols and words kids use."

Lacey recommends two websites — isafe.org and www.bullying.org — as resources on Internet harassment. For parents wishing to familiarize themselves with an up-to-date dictionary of computer acronyms and symbols, she suggested netlingo.com.

Speaking to the challenges of working in a district with a large population of English language learners who face stringent state testing mandates, Lacey said, "Every child is unique and every child can learn. There are always challenges in educating children."

"I hope to bring some new ideas to the district to help with those challenges," she added, "whether that be using data for differentiated instruction or my knowledge of technology."

Married to Robert Juliano, a retired sergeant for the New York Police Department, Lacey has a daughter, Nicole, 30, who works as an art teacher at Walt Whitman High School, and a son, Aaron, 27, a technician for a Formula One race team.

"They're happy, they're healthy kids," said Lacey. "I love them to pieces. I'm so proud of them."