

# Teens get job, life training at program at Palisades Center



Daniel Whelan, 17, of Nanuet, employs his graphic-design skills during his internship at gg Lounge, an e-sports and gaming space at the Palisades Center. Whelan starts his day at a BOCES program based at Suffern High School.

PHOTOS BY JOHN MEORE/THE JOURNAL NEWS

## Shopping around for the right future

**Nancy Cutler**

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**WEST NYACK** – A group of teens from Rockland and Orange counties are going to school in a mall, part of a new program that provides job training and hands-on internships with stores.

In partnership with Rockland BOCES, BRIDGES and the Palisades Center, Promoting the Acquisition of Lifelong Skills, or PALS, also helps hone “soft skills” – from communication and critical thinking to customer service and organizing. Along the way, students get a chance to explore career interests.

Daniel Whelan, 17, of Nanuet has been putting his graphic-design and

gaming skills to work at his internship at gg Lounge, an e-sports and gaming space. A lot of that focuses on graphic design with Whelan creating flyers for tournaments and other events at the store.

“My employers are very liberal with what I can do,” the high school junior said. When he has an idea for a project, he approaches gg Lounge owner Malek Adjoyi. “And I get the green light.”

Adjoyi said that when he first opened in November 2020, BRIDGES approached him about ensuring his venue would be accessible to all people of all abilities, and then about joining the internship program.

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Kayla Cooke of Washingtonville said she’s developed valuable skills during her internship at Lollipop Toy Store at the West Nyack mall.

**“The program gives a nice amount of room for creativity. You need it when you work with youth.”**

**Carlos Martinez**  
BRIDGES executive director and CEO

# School at mall

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Accessibility and helping others learn are “kind of the point” of opening a gaming hub, Adjoyi said.

And it’s paid off all the way around, as far as he’s concerned.

“Students get to learn skills they can take anywhere,” Adjoyi said, nodding toward Whelan. “Also, he’s a pretty good gamer and designer. Having him here took a lot of pressure off us.”

Students start their day in a BOCES program based at Suffern High School. Then they, and their teacher, Stephanie Musial, head to the Palisades Center. They have classes in one of the mall’s meeting rooms, and cover standard topics like English composition as well as job training. The mall supplies classroom space to BOCES for free.

Two days a week, students go to their internships. So far, participating stores include Lollipop Toy Shop, gg Lounge and Burlington Coat Factory.

A job coach from BRIDGES is there for support. The team also meets for discussions at BRIDGES’ offices on the second floor of the mall. The nonprofit’s wide experience advocating and empowering people with a range of disabili-



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ities has helped develop tailored programming for every student’s needs.

“It’s a very different experience for them,” Musial said of her students. “They are excited to be here.”

Academically, most students earn a Regents diploma and either go to college or enter the workforce, said Elise Rosenberg, principal of district-based second-

ary programs at BOCES. Students may be on the autism spectrum or face challenges with social anxiety.

Workforce training isn’t just about learning how to stack shelves and price items – though that’s in there, too. A big part of the experience focuses on building communication skills, problem solving and customer service.

Students are in a real job setting, so they also may have to pivot in real time when things don’t go as expected. “They learn how to self-regulate,” Rosenberg said, “if they’re out of their routine.”

These kinds of integrated and shared programs are supported through New York State Department of Education programs and grants; BRIDGES provides its job coaching through a state Pre-Employment Transition Services, or Pre-ETS, grant.

“The program gives a nice amount of room for creativity,” BRIDGES Executive Director and CEO Carlos Martinez said. “You need it when you work with youth.”

Martinez said the real-world jobs boost kids’ confidence in ways that will last a lifetime. “They see what they can do, they feel empowered to self-advocate.”

Kayla Cooke of Washingtonville said that shelf-stocking and other retail duties make up just a fraction of the skills she’s developed during her internship at Lollipop Toy Store.

“I learned that I could be comfortable,” said the 18-year-old senior who has anxiety. “Once you feel confident in your ability,” Cooke said, “it makes you feel great.”

Nancy Cutler writes about People & Policy. Follow her on Twitter at @nancyrockland.