



# Jessica Brennan

BY JENNA CAPUTO | PHOTOS BY ANGELA MIA PHOTOGRAPHY



## *Let's face it—we're hurting.*

The pandemic has not only physically thrown us into all-new circumstances, but emotionally too. And that has drained us in more ways than just one. That goes for our children too. They've been in and out of school, dealing with constant change, all while feeling not only their own stress but the stress of all the adults in their lives as well. Jessica

Brennan has witnessed this firsthand and is doing anything she can to help.

Originally from Stratford, CT, Jessica grew up enjoying snow and water skiing, volleyball, track, and flute. She knew from an early age that she wanted to help people. "There were times growing up where I met people who were really kind

and helpful and I would connect with them knowing that I wanted to be the same way as an adult," she says.

She became a licensed social worker, also certified as a Trauma Specialist. Over the years, she has worked in medical hospitals, mental health hospitals, and therapeutic schools. Now she's in the Niskayuna School District as an elementary school social worker based at Rosendale. The kids know her as the "Feelings Teacher," but she does a lot more than talk about feelings. Utilizing both play and direct teaching of skills, she helps children learn social skills and emotional regulation that they can use their whole lives. She also works with families and community agencies to support the child's needs with a whole child approach as well as assisting with crisis management in the building or within the district for a larger crisis. "As the sticker on my office door reads, 'If there was a problem yo—I'll solve it,'" she says. "Rosendale is my second family, and I love walking in those doors every day."

Since the pandemic began, anxiety within the school environment has risen to an all-time high. There is the daily





has become an organization that has connected Niskayuna residents who want to help with others who need it. Started from a corner of her office, the program has since received a grant from the Niskayuna Community Foundation and has grown to three other locations as the number of families on the list have grown. Other local organizations have been very supportive and are all ready to help whenever needed. The Niskayuna Police and Fire Departments, JCC, St. Kateri's, and many others have jumped in for everything from stuffing the fire truck, hosting a charity basketball tournament, slinging corned beef at a drive-thru, running the Hope Bus during the pandemic, and running district-wide food drives, among many other activities.

"I love Nisky NOW because it gives me the opportunity to enjoy everything that is great about Niskayuna—the people, their generosity, their willingness to help each other despite differences—Nisky NOW is my happy place," says Jessica. "Neighbors from all walks of life help our program. And it is a place where I shout it from the rooftops that we help each other. We have processes in place to make us run smoothly and efficiently, but we are all human and we all make mistakes. And when this happens, no one is upset or stressed—we just fix it and move on. My goal for NOW is to be a place where everyone feels like they are a part of a very supported and positive team."

Along with Nancy Bushee, a high school guidance counselor, Jessica is also responsible for the community's

# Stronger Together

strain on teachers and staff as they constantly need to adjust their teaching with quarantines, pivot closures, technology, etc., all while still supporting the children who are also adjusting to these changes and new demands. Not only are the kids more emotionally anxious, they're also delayed in their social negotiation, coping, and problem solving skills. "All the elementary building social workers are working with the teachers and staff and have been implementing the Zones of Regulation Program," says Jessica. "Parents who can incorporate the self-regulation strategies and tools will find that when kids practice these tools at home and school, they will show faster growth. Parents can also model tools to calm for their kiddos, like staff are doing at school. For example, the self-coach tool— 'Oh no! I wanted to make spaghetti tonight and we are all out and I don't have time to run to the store (Deep breaths). Hey, we are going to have egg noodles instead—little deal—this will be an adventure!'"

In keeping with her passion for helping others, Jessica has started the Nisky NOW program. Created to help children and their families receive the food they need, it

Nisky Attic program. The district really needed a clothing pantry, but space was a big issue, not to mention resources were limited, and they would really need help managing something like that. To top it off, COVID hit, and no one was allowed to touch anyone else's property. Then one day, the thought hit Jessica that they could have an online pantry. After coordinating with the District, they received another Niskayuna Community Foundation grant for publicity materials and away they went. If a student has a need—like for winter gear—the parent reaches out to any staff in the building, who will then notify Jessica or Nancy. They then post the need on the Nisky Attic Facebook page. When someone in the community has the item, they will message them and receive instructions on which school to drop the item at. At the school, there is a "Nisky Attic" container to drop the items in, where each item will sit for three days to kill germs before being sent home in the child's backpack, or a staff member can drop it directly at the home. These two programs have been a great way to connect families and the community together, and Jessica is thrilled with the response.





Family is important to Jessica. She met her husband, Tim, through a friend when she was 15 years old and he was 16. “We went to visit him at work one day at Subway, and I ordered a sandwich. It was the worst sandwich ever—all falling apart and messy,” she remembers. “He later told me that he was so nervous meeting me that he couldn’t concentrate. And

when I left the shop with my group of friends, he told his co-worker that he was going to marry me. Our first date was *Wayne’s World*, and we quickly became inseparable!”

Jessica and Tim both had traveled to upstate NY in the summers and loved it, so they decided to move here on a permanent basis, falling in love with Niskayuna at first sight. Their family now includes four children—two by birth and two adopted from foster care. Jessica had wanted to foster/adopt for as long as she could remember, and the more Tim learned about it, the more he wanted it as well. “There were always children I worked with along the way who I wished I could have had more time with—done more to provide love and care for,” says Jessica. “Being a foster parent is a big leap of faith and is very complicated and stressful but it is totally worth the journey.” Jessica and Tim became licensed Therapeutic Foster Care Parents. Fostering can be a hard and sometimes intrusive process but remembering that it is far from the trauma that the children go through has always helped Jessica’s family get through it, as well as keeping in mind that when a child goes back to their birth family, they will still have the love and security the Brennan family provided them for the rest of their lives. “We love it,” says Jessica. “Our children all have their own stories. Because of this, we have many people who love our kids, and we have a huge extended family—lots of kids to play with on holidays and get together and lots of support.”

Tim is a partner/attorney specializing in Construction Law and Medical Malpractice Defense at PPD Law Firm. He coaches youth football, serves on the Board, and is a master griller. Cadence (18) studies early education at SUNY Oneonta, where she was recruited for softball. In her off time, she works at a special education daycare center. Brooks (16) plays and trains for football and basketball year-round and works a side job as a filing clerk. Lilly (12) sings, is learning guitar, practices Jiu Jitsu, and is in the Girl Scouts. Alex (10)





to get through the pandemic is to ask for help and to help when you can. "We need to know that we are stronger together.

We need to lean on each other, and not judge each other. Every act of kindness ripples into the world like a stone tossed into a pond (a reference dedicated to a special group of students)!" ~

*For more information on Nisky NOW or Nisky Attic, please visit their Facebook pages or the District website.*

plays and trains for football and baseball year-round. They share their household with their rescue pups, Xena and Macho. Since fostering had made it hard to travel, the Brennan family purchased a pontoon boat to enjoy weekend adventures together when weather allows.

When not working, Jessica loves finding a good bargain while thrifting. She also serves on the Niskayuna Town Board and is looking forward to when kids will be able to play, hug, and be together without social distancing. Her advice for our community while working together