



JESSICA LAFEX — *Saying Yes*

BY JENNA CAPUTO — PHOTOS BY ANGELA MIA PHOTOGRAPHY
& CONTRIBUTED BY THE SNOW/LAFEX FAMILY

Originally from Syracuse, NY, Jessica LaFex grew up surrounded by extended family. She loved reading and music, always playing the piano and singing from a young age thanks to her piano-playing grandpa. In addition to singing with the Syracuse Children's Chorus in middle school, she accompanied other choruses throughout middle and high school and performed in the high school musicals before attending college at UAlbany.

Going into school, she thought she wanted to be a lawyer and to pursue her music in some way, perhaps through piano performance. Music had become a passion that she felt deep in her soul, but she quickly realized that making it a part of her course of study took something away from that emotion. "This thing that had always been a joy became real work," she remembers. "I learned that music was something I just wanted to love. I didn't mean to be a quitter in any way, I just knew I didn't want to ruin loving it by making it something other than a passion. So I pulled away after I graduated. I'm glad to find that love again every once in a while."

She also realized being a lawyer wasn't her true calling either. "When the time came to pull that trigger, I wasn't motivated," she says. "So then I was confused about what I actually *wanted* to do,

and though I couldn't put my finger on what that actually was, I was drawn to help people." Jess researched the Teach for America program. She did not end up working with them, but the preparation had made an impression, and she decided to attend the College of St. Rose for a masters in Adolescent English Education. She is now a seventh and eighth grade English teacher at Lisha Kill Middle School in South Colonie. It's a decision that felt right from the beginning, and she feels she has found her place.

"I love middle schoolers," she says. "They are on the cusp of becoming adults but are still very much kids—and you just never know which one of those will be present in any given day. They're challenging and there are never two days the same. Some of them long to be pushed, and others just to be loved, but they're all just trying to figure 'it'—themselves—out. It's fun to watch and be a part of. I also love people who work with middle schoolers. Any people who have to think all day, every day about all of the above are people I like to spend time with. They're flexible and funny, thoughtful and sensitive, wise and resourceful."

Jess has embraced her calling to help. Working with the Lisha Kill Student Council, she's assisting the kids with their ambitious



outdoor classroom project. Inspired by COVID, the kids wanted to make a space where they could get outside to have class no matter what was going on; plus, it's a great way to release the creative juices after being cooped up for so long. They're hosting fundraisers and a dodgeball tournament this month, as well as working with local businesses, and they're hoping to have a springtime installation.

Jessica is also the Pantry Manager at Nisky NOW, in charge of ordering the food each week from the Regional Food Bank to make sure families have breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks for the weekends. In addition, the bags contain bread and vouchers for Stewart's milk and eggs. Her whole family helps pack the bags each week, and Jess and the other volunteers are always looking for creative ways to get the community involved with events like their middle school competition to see who could collect the most peanut butter and jelly. They have also set up a program where local firefighters, policemen, and community leaders create their own videos showing how they make the best PB&J sandwich, which could include any type of bread, jelly flavor, or extras like pretzels. They also host cereal and canned food drives as well as other incentives throughout the year.

Jess met her husband, Patrick Snow, during college when a friend thought they'd make a great match. Patrick was a year ahead and attending Clarkson at the time, so they met on one of his breaks and have been together ever since. He did his graduate work in the area to be near her and completed his Ph.D. at RPI. He is now an engineer at Global Foundries and a volunteer firefighter with the Niskayuna Fire District #2, currently taking the EMT class to work toward his certification. Jess and Patrick first lived in Troy together before upsizing in Niskayuna to be in the school district and near both Patrick's family and Jess' job.

They now have three children—Madison (12), Tommy (9), and Julia (7), along with Charley, their lab-boxer mix from Homeward Bound and their beta fish, RickFishyBob (named by all three kids). Madison is in seventh grade at Iroquois Middle School and swims with the modified swim team. She's an avid reader and a Cadette in the Girl Scouts. Tommy is



—continued

—continued

in fourth grade at Rosendale Elementary and lives for video games. He reads about them, writes about them, wears clothing about them, and even dreams of them! Julia is in first grade at Rosendale and has a creative side, often engaged with imaginary play with dolls or figurines or dressing up to be someone else for a while. All three kids love to swim with the Niskayuna Wild Turkeys Swim Team each summer.

Julia is a Girl Scout Daisy, currently learning all about the Girl Scout Promise and Law. Madison's Cadette

troop is working on their Silver Award after earning their Bronze Award for their How-To-Survive-COVID video, which included important information at the beginning of the pandemic on how to properly wash hands, social distance, etc. Jess co-leads both troops and has also stepped into a Service Unit Manager role, co-coordinating all of Niskayuna's troops. They hold monthly meetings, plan events for all levels, facilitate the communication with the larger Girl Scouts organization, and help recognize local leaders for their time and contributions.

Her volunteer work doesn't end just with the Girl Scouts and Nisky NOW. Jess also teaches religious education classes at St. Kateri, is co-president for both Rosendale's and Iroquois' PTOs, sits on the Farmers' Market Town Committee, and works at the Lansing's stand there each week. In addition to attending her own book club group, she also hosts a book club for some of her former students. They had started it during COVID and continue to meet outside at their school's tennis courts when the weather allows. If the books they choose also have a movie, they watch that together as well. "They're all now in high school, and it's such a pleasure to see their faces once a month and to stay in touch," says Jess.

Jess' most treasured activities always involve her kids. "I think they're just the coolest people on the planet!" she says. One of their newest fun events is Adventure August, which they started last year. Each day of the month, they try a new "adventure." Sometimes that means learning to cook something they've never tried before. Sometimes it means taking a hike or going someplace new. They visited many local treasures last year, like June Farms, Art Omi, Howe's Caverns, Walkway Over the Hudson, and many more. Jess' favorite adventures included Secret Caverns (near Howe's), the Walkway Over the Hudson, and the night they borrowed a telescope and drove out near Thompson's Lake with friends to drink hot

chocolate, eat snacks, and lay under the stars to watch the meteors. The kids say their best adventure was going to June Farms to play in the goats' pen. "They named the goats and claimed which were whose. They've asked at least once a week since then if we can get goats as pets," Jess laughs.

Their family has also created some fun holiday traditions. Christmas Eve has now become "SnowFex Feliz Navidad." When trying to decide what to do for the Christmas Eve dinner with their extended family one year, they decided on tacos, and the tradition stuck. Now including friends in their evening as well, they eat tacos, wear t-shirts with sheep on them that read "Fleece Navidad," and participate in both a kids' and adults' White Elephant gift exchange. "It's truly our favorite night of the year!" says Jess. They also now celebrate "Christnukkah" each year with neighbor friends, eating ham, latkes, and applesauce, enjoying the foods from both holiday traditions. Even during COVID, they shared the meal via Zoom.

The Snow/LaFex family loves to travel to the beach. They join Pat's family at Cape Cod every year right after school ends and visit with Jess' family in August at the Jersey Shore. Sometimes they head to South Carolina on the February or April breaks, and Jess dreams of someday owning a home at the ocean. When they're here in the Capital District, they love taking advantage of all the seasons, from shopping at the local farms for plants for their garden in spring to hitting the beaches at the state parks in the summer, picking apples and pumpkins in the fall, and ice fishing and snowshoeing in the winter. But Jess' most cherished times are home with her family, hanging together watching a movie.

One of Jess' favorite mantras is "Be the change you wish to see in the world." She also has a plaque that reads, "*It isn't your job to help everybody*, I said, and she said, *Oh, I know that, but let's just help anyway.*"

"I'm passionate about helping others," says Jess.

"I feel like we're all going to stumble—and maybe even downright fall—at some point or another, and finding our footings again will be just a little bit easier when someone is there to help. I attended a yoga program a few years ago that asked us to "be a yes." I've embraced that thinking and decided to say yes when I can. It keeps me busy, but I hope I'm teaching my kids to be helpers.

"I wish for us to be as happy as possible as often as possible. We only get one chance at this, so I wish for as much happiness for all of us as we can have in this one lifetime." ☺

