

PAAAS POST

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AND PAAAS

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Dr. Bento and PAAAS

WRITTEN BY JENNIFER GUALLPA, NATALY ZELAYA WITH
ASSISTANCE FROM SIERRA COLVIN

"I come from a family of very strong women," Dr. Bento told PAAAS Post in an exclusive interview. When asked who had been her greatest influence, she said "to single one out is kind of impossible. My grandmother ran her own business very successfully in the 1940's and 50's. This truly reflects her strong personality and determination to succeed. She was also raising children alone, while my grandfather was living in the USA trying to establish himself in order to bring his family over."

Dr. Bento's retirement as principal of PAAAS does not only mark the end of a chapter for the school but also for one in Dr. Bento's life and career, one that started in Newark, New Jersey, where she was born to her Portuguese parents. She grew up in Newark as well as in Kearny and Portugal.



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After completing high school, she went on to pursue a higher education by doing her undergraduate work at Caldwell University, she then completed her masters in Montclair University and attended the University of Phoenix for her 2nd Masters degree. However she did not stop there as she obtained her doctoral degree at Washington University. When asked what had led her to pursue a career in education, she told us she fell in love with teaching when she was given an opportunity to work on a gentrification project during college. "We were working in Harlem and the Bronx, in very beautiful neighborhoods that just needed a little polishing to bring back the beauty they once had," she told us. There, she began to work with high school students that were also involved in the project. "At the end of that particular summer," Dr. Bento remembers, "I knew teaching was my career choice."

Although teaching had become her career choice, during her junior year of college, she had gone home and told her parents she had decided to become a flight attendant. However, as she notes, "as you can see that did not go over very well. Here I am!"

Throughout her educational career she has held various positions, starting out as a teacher, then becoming a coordinator, supervisor, vice principal and finally Principal. She has also worked in various districts and areas such as in Irvington, Kearny, West Caldwell, Elizabeth and, of course, here in Plainfield. Given the years of working in the educational field, we asked her if there were any expectations about this career path that she might have found different from reality in both a good or bad way. Dr Bento replied, "The ultimate expectation that I have always had is that a District works together with all stakeholders for the betterment and success of its students. Sometimes, when politics get in the way, the decisions made may not be in the best interest of students."



Undoubtedly, Dr. Bento's role in the development and creation of PAAAS was crucial. It started in 2008, when she was given a year by a former Superintendent to design and create not only a performing arts school but also a school that would cater to the gifted students. Why specifically a performing arts school some may ask themselves? Dr. Bento informed us that the decision was based on a survey given to the community at the time. The residents felt there should be a school of arts available for students that were interested in arts and wanted to remain in town instead of going to the county's Magnet school.

After much research, taking time to visit schools and assessing the needs in Plainfield to execute the establishment of an arts school, she designed the foundation and structure of what became known as "PAAAS," the name of which was given by a former Superintendent. PAAAS was set to offer its students a personalized, safe learning environment, student centered experiences, high expectations and standards, rigor, 100% graduation rate, and successful post secondary preparation.

P A A A S P O S T

Throughout the years, since PAAAS opened its doors to the first groups of students, Dr. Bento informs us that her vision for the school has not changed, but rather has improved as the years have gone by. When asked about hardships she encountered in the process of creating PAAAS she told us, “ We have faced so many challenges and obstacles in order to achieve success that I rather not focus on them. What matters is that we always overcome our challenges.”

Some day, the name “Dr. Bento” will be a legend, especially to the future newcomers to PAAAS. As a chapter closes, a new chapter begins for both PAAAS and Dr. Bento. The future of PAAAS looks bright as in the coming years it will have some major construction done starting in spring. As for Dr. Bento, after retirement, she intends to take each day one at a time, savoring each moment, and looking forward to her new beginnings. Perhaps she will return to PAAAS in the future to see some of her former students, but for now, she leaves the student body with this quote by Sheryl Sanber, “The most important thing I have learned is that we are not born with a certain amount of resilience. It is a muscle, and that means we can build it. We build resilience into ourselves. We build resilience into the people we love. And we build it together, as a community. That’s called ‘collective resilience.’ It’s an incredibly powerful force – and it’s one that our country and our world need a lot more of right now. It is in our relationships with each other that we find our will to live, our capacity to love, and our ability to bring change into this world.”



The Evolution of PAAAS

WRITTEN BY NATALY ZELAYA
AND KELLY CALDERON

Working at PAAAS for almost 12 years now, two of the original PAAAS staff members, Mr. Miller and Mr. Williams, experienced not only the beginning stages of PAAAS but have also seen its evolution throughout the years. Prior to working at PAAAS, they both worked at Plainfield Highschool alongside Dr. Bento who was their supervisor. It was during this time in 2008 when Dr. Bento was tasked with establishing a performing arts school as part of a former superintendent's plan to create smaller learning communities, one of which would be arts based. Since Mr. Miller and Mr. Williams had already been working alongside Dr. Bento, it was only natural that they joined in laying the foundations for PAAAS.

One of the early promises of PAAAS was to allow students who had artistic skills and a desire for rigot to be able to develop in their respective disciplines in an environment where not only the students, but the teachers also have an appreciation for the arts. In order to see what could be done here in Plainfield, inspiration was drawn from several performing arts schools around the nation including LaGuardia High School in New York City.

To see how a successful arts school ran, Dr.Bento, Mr.Miller, and Mr.Williams visited the school and had the opportunity of seeing skilled high school students who had a deep affinity for the arts. Mr. Miller stated, "Everytime you teach a subject, it is exciting to see kids who are hungry to develop in their area". After seeing students' commitment and excitement to grow in the arts at LaGuardia, Mr. Miller hoped that the same environment could be implemented in Plainfield.

When PAAAS first opened in 2009, it was met with excitement from the neighborhood, parents and most importantly by students. Mr. Miller described the first group of students at PAAAS as being excited for the opportunity to have a designated period in school where they could focus on their craft. Over the years, PAAAS has seen changes not only to its physical structure but also to the different types of students. Mr.Miller describes throughout the years having seen students of a variety of skill level,commitment, and passion. It is because of this passion for the arts that Mr.Miller crafted Cafe PAAAS, a platform for students from every studio to showcase their talents to the broader community, where the exposure to an audience would serve as a catalyst for students growth as artists.

When asked what makes PAAAS different from the other highschoools, he simply replied, "Arts are the focal point, and that was very intentional". That original vision of combining rigor and advanced studies with the arts has provided students with a different perspective of life. Mr.Miller explained that the implementation of the arts and the push to develop skills leads to students having an entrepreneurial mindset. He stated "That's the push here that I think is different, especially when it's being driven, when people stay close to that vision."

The evolution and growth of PAAAS is due in part to the vision and efforts of Dr.Bento. Mr.Miller expressed, " Dr.Bento has positively influenced the community by having the desire to see kids have a space where they can practice their art and develop their talent and she was willing to fight for that as much as she could". As her chapter here at PAAAS comes to end, the environment and appreciation for the arts that she has worked to create will live on through its current and future generation of students.

PAAAS in Europe

WRITTEN BY DAYAN BARDALES



In 2011, Dr. Bento took off on a voyage overseas to Europe with a group of PAAAS students. PAAAS extending past the short walls which surrounds us must be a strange thing to hear about as anyone who hasn't been in the school for long. However, these European trips created a rare phenomenon of happiness, exclusively shared by Dr. Bento and alumni, affecting the sense of community we now know.

During the first Europe trip in 2011, students went to England. The following trip took place in 2013, with students travelling to England, France and Italy. The last trip was in 2015, this time travelling to Portugal and Spain.

The trip took around 7-10 days. Students got to fearlessly indulge in unknown cultures, eating foods such as cod fish and octopus. They did a lot of sightseeing as well as partaking in culturally immersed activities.

As joyful as these trips were, a lot of work was put in behind the scenes by Dr. Bento. Each trip was two years apart because they took that long to plan. They required a minimum of a year of fundraising which students helped with.

All students were responsible for making up all the work they missed. But did this not matter to anyone at all? Students were more than happy returning to school from Europe. They could only think about doing it again. All the hard work from Dr. Bento and students were absolutely worth it.

Plans were in the making to set off to Greece previous to the pandemic. Although the Europe trips may no longer take place at PAAAS, they ingrained the history of this school by being some of the earliest roots of sense of community here. They also greatly marked Dr. Bento's career.

"I loved taking the kids!" She expressed as she reflected back on those times.

Best School Banners

WRITTEN BY CHRISTOPHER GODOY

Since its creation in 2009, PAAAS, under Dr. Bento's administration, has never failed to continuously bring recognition to the school and district. In fact, the school has recently been ranked among the best high schools in the United States for the 4th time in a row, as reported by the U.S. News and World Report. This is an honor that only 40% of high schools in the country are eligible to obtain. This not only says a lot about the quality of education PAAAS students receive, but it also says a lot about the administration's ability to lead the school.

"I am extremely proud of the PAAAS administration and teachers who take pride in preparing competent, forward-thinking, confident young adults who are committed to life-long learning...what an honor for Plainfield Public Schools"(Dr. Diana Mitchell, Superintendent of Plainfield Schools, TAPinto 2020).

PAAAS was first recognized as a bronze-level school in 2016 but has since risen through the ranks to silver status. How are schools eligible to receive such awards? According to U.S. News & World Reports, "To earn a gold, silver or bronze medal from U.S. News, schools must pass a four-step evaluation, which looks at students' performance on required state tests, their graduation rates, and their college readiness."

When looking at PAAAS specifically, we currently have a graduation rate of 100%, perform exceptionally well in standardized tests (in comparison to other schools in the area), and send most, if not all, of its students to obtain a post-secondary education & degree. In addition, PAAAS offers "a dynamic, innovative and rigorous curriculum that is academically and talent ability balanced" (PAAAS Website). It should come as no surprise that PAAAS receives such awards.



"This achievement is only possible when a team believes in the school's vision and mission"
(Dr. Bento, TAPinto 2020).

Whether we know it or not, it takes a lot to run a school. Dr. Bento has worked tirelessly over the years to put PAAAS on the path to success, and the recognition awards are just one of many things that reflect her hard work and dedication. However, this is only the beginning as, thanks to Dr. Bento for laying the foundation, we will undoubtedly achieve gold status one day.

Dr. Bento has welcomed and graduated generations of bright and intelligent students, who after receiving a PAAAS education, have gone to become real leaders. This wouldn't have been possible if it wasn't for Dr. Bento and her original vision for PAAAS, in becoming "New Jersey's premier small learning community providing personalized arts and academic preparation for the 21st-century student." Despite her departure from PAAAS, Dr. Bento's legacy will continue to be present throughout the school building, through every mural, every classroom, and every current and future student.



THE MURALS

WRITTEN BY NAILAH WILLIAMS



As we all know Dr.Bento will be leaving and among the things she will miss will be seeing the murals in her office and around the school. . The murals were an idea from the art teacher at the time, who suggested painting them around the school.

Dr.Bento believes the two murals in the main office hold the most importance. They were gifts from the seniors of the art class at the time. "I took pictures of them and had them placed in a memory album so I can always look at them."

Mrs. Hill and the Future

WRITTEN BY EMANUEL PERRY

Mrs. Hill has been the Vice Principal of PAAAS for six years. She has been Dr. Bento's right hand for many of the important decisions that concern the school. With the news of Dr. Bento's retirement, all eyes have fallen on Mrs.Hill as she has taken the role of interim Principal. Mrs.Hill took some time to answer questions about her life, her time at PAAAS, and the future of the school.

She attended Trenton State College (now TCNJ) and St. Peter's University. She noted that one of her favorite classes had been Interpersonal Communication, she also informed us that, Dr. Sims, her professor, served as a role model for her while she was a student. Originally she had wanted to become an Obstetrician/Gynecologist.

However, she earned her Bachelor of Arts in Communication and Master of Arts in Educational Leadership. She worked as a teacher for five years before becoming a school administrator.

She has had to dish out some tough love as an administrator, particularly with Covid restrictions, she told us, "until we all consistently do our part to protect ourselves and one another, we will continue to have to fight this pandemic." Although she is unsure when the school will be able to resume normal operations without the use of masks or other covid restrictions, she remains optimistic that if students do their part, this may be over sooner than we thought.

Mrs. Hill also expressed interest in the Principal position, stating that it would be an incredible opportunity, and that, like any good leader, she has a vision for what the school could be. She envisions a larger school with an auditorium, a gymnasium, locker rooms, larger studio spaces, and more art in the hallways. She is also interested in establishing new studios while maintaining the ones that already exist.

Mrs. Hill strives to be a role model for students, arriving at school each day with a desire to educate them. When asked if she was proud of her work here, she responded, "Absolutely. Dr. Bento has been a tremendous mentor to me and each day continues to be a learning experience."

"Awe-inspiring," "phenomenal," and "the heartbeat of PAAAS" are just a few of the words Mrs. Hill used to describe Dr. Bento's personality. Dr. Bento's absence will undoubtedly leave a large void in the school's atmosphere; she will be missed by all students and faculty.

As the school's founder, she has shaped the learning experience for both current and former students, as well as faculty, but she has also ensured that we are left in good hands. Mrs. Hill wishes Dr. Bento the best and looks forward to the next chapter in her life.

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PAAAS Alumni

WRITTEN BY NATALY ZELAYA AND KELLY CALDERON

Since its beginning, PAAAS has been a place for students to create a personalized learning environment and it also caters to the interests of students by allowing them to develop their craft. With eight graduating classes, former alumni have been critical in not only laying the groundwork for future students to come, but also creating a school experience different from others, the PAAAS experience. Former students share the undeniable impact that both PAAAS and Dr.Bento have had on them

The environment created by Dr.Bento combining the arts with academics is a unique experience former students have come to value. Ilse Ibarra from the class of 2017 stated, "PAAAS has allowed me to keep in touch with teachers like Mr. Carter, who has been a mentor to me throughout highschool and college. I was able to realize I can be a leader and I can be successful despite all the adversity I've experienced being a First Generation Student due to the environment that Principal Bento has created throughout her career." Similar to Ilse, valedictorian of the class of 2021 Etbaal Hernandez expressed "I honestly loved staying in PAAAS.

The amount of friends I made and the connections I had with my teachers, it was amazing. I was able to be exposed to the arts in Plainfield and in New Jersey in general."

A successful post secondary education preparation was something Dr.Bento wanted to implement in PAAAS that many other schools did not offer. And it is something the alumni confidently attested to. When asked to describe how PAAAS has impacted her life, Alejandra Rivera from the class of 2017 put it simply, "Without PAAAS I wouldn't be in the career path I am today. Truly wouldn't have found what I am good at." Andrew Mejia Cole from the class of 2020 added, "PAAAS allowed me to experiment with my creativity and problem solving skills and I was able to mature to the person I am now thanks to the guidance of the staff around me."

Taking from their lessons learned at PAAAS, these former students credit the school for being an integral part of their growth and preparation for their life after high school; one of the many visions for PAAAS that has been successfully seen through.

Not only was Dr. Bento a fundamental part in establishing PAAAS, but she became, and continues to be a role model to PAAAS students. As Alejandra Rivera described her, she is, "An example to follow, in all sense. She has not only cared for her students but taught her students what a role model looks like." Like Alejandra, Etbaal Hernandez shared this same admiration for Dr. Bento, "Dr. Bento is someone who I definitely admire. She is very hard working and she does what is best for us as students. She teaches us discipline and as a principal, she does a really good job in preparing us for the future and to succeed." Her authority and guidance motivated these students to strive to uncover their true potential, whether it was through the arts, or everyday school activities; her role as principal was pivotal in their development.

Dr. Bento's leadership carried through to the PAAAS community as a whole as well.

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Andrew Mejia Cole asserts, "Bento understood the PAAAS culture and thus having her around allowed a lot of the students to have the experiences that helped them grow." Her ability to maintain discipline and provide support exhibits the positive effect she had on PAAAS. "As PAAAS is one of the top high schools in the US, I can say that she has done a lot for the school. The school became more organized and began to embrace school spirit", says Etbaal Hernandez from the class of 2021

The many qualities that were envisioned for PAAAS during its development, were made a reality because of Dr.Bento. She created a community that supported individuality, while still maintaining a sense of discipline and respect. This is what made PAAAS distinct from other schools, and Andrew Mejia Cole put it best, "...the PAAAS community is nothing like any other school I've seen. There is a strong sense of individuality and I can strongly say that no one was trying to act cool because we had no idea what cool is. People were themselves, which is rare in school settings." Jose Aceituno from the class of 2020 attests to the community's originality as well, "We differ because we were taught discipline and respect, she made it very clear that we had to treat everyone with the highest respect and she always pushed us to do better and I think that was what made us so different than others."

The close knit community and Dr.Bento's presence and influence around the school is an aspect of PAAAS that alumni have noted truly made a difference. This sense of community was vital during their stay at PAAAS and its lasting impact is something the alumni still reminisce about and feel today.



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-JOSE ACEITUNO

"BENTO UNDERSTOOD THE PAAAS CULTURE AND THUS HAVING HER AROUND ALLOWED A LOT OF THE STUDENTS TO HAVE THE EXPERIENCES THAT HELPED THEM GROW."

- ANDREW MEJIA COLE

"DR. BENTO IS SOMEONE WHO I DEFINITELY ADMIRE. SHE IS VERY HARD WORKING AND SHE DOES WHAT IS BEST FOR US AS STUDENTS. SHE TEACHES US DISCIPLINE AND AS A PRINCIPAL, SHE DOES A REALLY GOOD JOB IN PREPARING US FOR THE FUTURE AND TO SUCCEED."

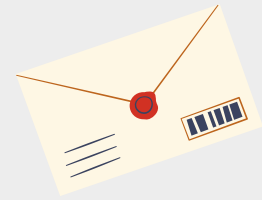
-ETBAAL HERNANDEZ

"AN EXAMPLE TO FOLLOW, IN ALL SENSE. SHE HAS NOT ONLY CARED FOR HER STUDENTS BUT TAUGHT HER STUDENTS WHAT A ROLE MODEL LOOKS LIKE."

-ALEJANDRA RIVERA

Letters for Dr. Bento

FROM ALUMNI



Chevan Thomas (Class of 2013)

To Dr. Bento,

Hey!!! I hope all is well! It's been awhile, but I promise we will see each other soon. I just want to say thank you for all you have done not just for my family, but for me as a student and me as a leader in this world. Thank you for teaching me that failure is not the end! Thank you for teaching me that personal responsibility is a must! Thank you for also being hard on me and the rest of the PAAAS scholars when it came to our attitudes, mentalities, work ethic and our uniforms.

You have been the best principal I have ever had in my entire life! Allowing me to audition and become a part of the first graduate class of PAAAS was and still is an honor. I would have never done it without you. You were and still are a woman of integrity, a woman of faith, and a woman of your word. I thank you for the long and short talks we had while I was a High school student as well as an Alumni. You never gave up on me and supported all of my dreams.

Thank you for supporting my wife, Bethany Thomas, as well as our newly added member Arielle Autumn Thomas, I promise you will see them both soon. Thank you for your love and your heart to push me to the highest level of not just education but life. I know I can say a whole bunch more, but I will leave it at this. I love you Mrs. Bento and God bless.

From your favorite,

Chevan Thomas

Sayrai Williams (Class of 2020)

"You have one more strike before I expel you from this school!" I know it was a long and hard 5 years, but thank you for seeing something in me. Thank you for showing me that I have potential to do anything I set my mind to. Lastly, thank you for being the principal that I not only needed but the one that I'd eventually grow to want. It was fun while it lasted and I hope I was able to make an impact on your life just as much as you made an impact on mine. Enjoy your retirement

With lots of love,

Sayrai Williams

Daniel Williams

Dear Dr. Bento

Throughout the years I have attended PAAAS, you have helped prepare me for college and life. We have shared many wonderful experiences including the Europe trip. With your guidance and help, I achieved much at this school, learning essential lessons for college and the real world such as my math classes. May you enjoy your retirement. You along with the school have truly made a difference in my life.

With congratulations,

Daniel Williams

Letters for Dr. Bento

FROM ALUMNI

Ilse Ibarra (Class of 2017)

Having the opportunity to attend PAAAS has made a huge impact in not only my life, but in all of my siblings' lives. As a senior studying Civil Engineering at NJIT and an engineering intern in NYC, I give so much credit to the environment and community this school has exposed me to. The focus on discipline and encouragement to be successful has stuck with me until this day. PAAAS has allowed me to keep in touch with teachers like Mr. Carter, who has been a mentor to me throughout highschool and college. I was able to realize I can be a leader and I can be successful despite all the adversity I've experienced being a First Generation Student due to the environment that Principal Bento has created throughout her career.



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