



Pocantico Hills Highlights

A monthly newsletter of information and updates about the Pocantico Hills School community

January 2024

One Poco Night celebrates cultural pride

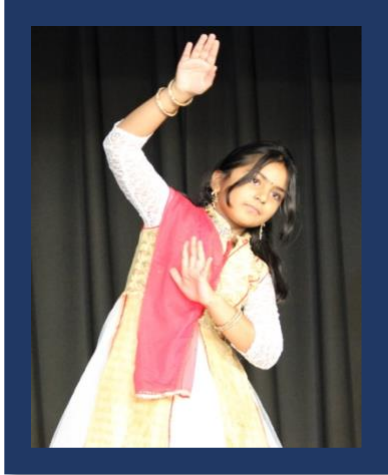
As someone who still performs the dance herself, Shalini Verma felt a rush of pride watching her daughter, a third-grade student at Pocantico Hills, demonstrate Kathak, an ancient Indian classical dance form. When her daughter's routine was finished, her mother immediately tried to hug her off-stage, but first had to wade through the handful of well-wishing friends who had arrived first.



She said the success of her daughter's routine was an achievement of its own; however, seeing her embrace and share her culture and traditions only enhanced it.

“It can be easy to pick up what you see around you and your culture can get lost,” said Ms. Verma, who is originally from India. “But this event helps them to build that confidence to be proud of where you come from.”

The Vermas were one of many families who shared in this mission of One Poco Night, which was hosted by the Pocantico Hills Central School District for the fifth time on Thursday, January 25. Hundreds of students, parents, teachers and administrators participated in the annual event, which began with performances and demonstrations in the school auditorium and continued in the gym. The space was filled with dozens of tables that featured foods and fun crafts that celebrated different cultures around the world.



“One Poco Night is one of the most special nights of the year for Pocantico,” said Principal Adam Brown, who arrived with an empty stomach and sampled many different offerings. “Because we are so diverse — our families come from over 80 different countries, speak dozens of languages, and have so many of their own cultural roots to share — tonight is a night when people can come together and celebrate each other through food, through dance, through traditions. It’s a night of joy and togetherness for

our school.”

One Poco Night began as an initiative to celebrate the school’s rich diversity and its footprint only continues to expand, as was evident at this year’s event. Music teacher Sheila DePaola, who helped Mr. Brown organize the night and served as the emcee in the auditorium, said students at every age from PreK through sixth grade participated.

“The parents spent a lot of time together with their kids working on these performances,” Ms. DePaola said. “This is probably the most acts we’ve ever had perform.”

Spectators in the standing-room-only auditorium saw seven different performances in all, plus a fashion show with various forms of attire that represented different cultures. The acts celebrated Arabic, Dominican, Indian, Italian, and Chinese cultures. The finale featured sixth-grader Claire W., who performed on the guzheng, a classical Chinese harp.

Third-grader Clara M. danced Tarantella alongside her sister, Enza, a first-grade student, to honor their grandmother, who is from Italy.

“That’s important to me,” Clara said. “I wanted to do it because I can represent my culture. That makes me feel good and feel proud.”

That sense of cultural pride has become the overriding mission of One Poco Night. It has given students and their families the opportunity to share more of themselves with the community.



“I think there can be a lot of pressure for people to leave their cultural roots behind and assimilate while losing your identity,” Mr. Brown said. “We, here, feel the opposite is important. We want you to hold tight to your identity, celebrate it, share it, perform, and be proud of it.”

Renowned educator Dr. Luvelle Brown instructs students, staff how to use their words for good

During Dr. Luvelle Brown’s visit to Pocantico Hills, he greeted each middle school class as they walked into the auditorium and thanked them for showing up. It is all about making connections, getting to know one another, and moving in a diverse world where everyone shows one another the respect they deserve.



Dr. Brown began his career in education as a kindergarten teacher before becoming a school administrator. He now serves as Superintendent of the Ithaca City School District. He is the recipient of multiple awards and recognitions, most recently the 2022 Dr. Effie Jones Humanitarian Award by the American Association of School Administrators. Throughout his career he has lectured on education and serves as an adjunct faculty member at SUNY Cortland and St. John Fisher College.

During Dr. Brown’s visit to Pocantico, he introduced students to different ways they can connect with one another at a deeper level. The goal is to gain an understanding of others and who they are and to celebrate the range of diversity that exists throughout the school.

“It builds community, and it builds relationships,” he said.

During the interactive assembly, Dr. Brown first asked students to turn to the people nearest them and thank them for showing up today.

“Whenever I see a learner, I am going to say, ‘thank you for being here,’” Dr. Brown said. At the time he graduated high school, he held the distinction of being one of only two people in the country who never missed a day of school from kindergarten through his senior year of high school. That other person? His twin brother.

“No one thanked us for showing up,” he said.

This exercise, he said, helps to validate people and acknowledge them and their effort.

In another interactive exercise, Dr. Brown had students get up from their auditorium seat, move to another area of the space and talk to someone and get to know one another better than they had before.

This is a way, he explained, to have a different type of conversation. There are three ways people know one another—on the surface, such as learning what foods, clothing, or music they like. The second is shallower, through non-verbal communication. The third way is more deep knowledge or “unconscious assumptions that govern our world view,” he said, and can relate to politics or religion.

Having these types of conversations helps people to develop deeper, more meaningful relationships and better understanding of who they are.

“We must bring our authentic selves to these spaces if we want to learn,” he said.

When students were asked what they gained from this exercise, one said they felt empowered to express themselves, another said they learned something new about their friend, and another mentioned how they learned more about their friend’s culture.

The idea of culture was also discussed by Dr. Brown and how it has a broader definition than others will believe.

“Culture” he said, “relates to age, religion, nationality, gender, class, orientation and ethnicity.”

Using the example of the X-Men universe, Dr. Brown, an avowed comic books admirer, noted how the X-Men world is so diverse, and it is a concept that makes the story that much more compelling.

“I want you to think about how beautiful and powerful we are because we are diverse,” he said. “It’s the key to student achievement.”

Playing into all of this is the language used by everyone and the impact it can have.

Simply put, “language matters,” Dr. Brown said.

“It gives you a sense of what you are thinking,” he continued.

What is important to remember when speaking is the history, context and relationships around certain words and phrases.

Dr. Brown cited a racial slur as an example, though without using the word.

The word has a disturbing history attached to it and can be very powerful, he said, asking, “Why is it so powerful?”

“You have to know the history of it, how it became a slur,” he said.

However, Dr. Brown noted, there has never been a cultural consensus as to when the word can and cannot be used.

In some instances, there are some who may use it as a term of affection for close friends or family. It may be used in certain types of music or in books, and it is incumbent upon us to know about these historical contexts and relationships when the word is used.

“I need you to know so you can talk about it,” Dr. Brown said, referring to all words and phrases that can be used to terrify or harm others.

He also shared with students a list of words and phrases that have a sordid history. Among them are “Master Bedroom,” “peanut gallery” and “illegal alien.”

“Oftentimes we use language unintentionally,” he said, adding that knowing the origin of words and phrases and why they should no longer be used is important.

“My challenge to you is to reflect on the words that have been used to harm,” he encouraged. “Can these words be used lovingly or is it coming from a place of hate and meanness? I’m asking you to think about your thinking.”

Principal Adam Brown encouraged students to pay attention to their guest.

“We have a need to talk about the ways we treat each other,” he said. “We are building a culture between children who are very different from one another.”

In the afternoon, Dr. Brown met with faculty and again thanked them for being there.

Art teacher Jolene Morotti noted a student had thanked her earlier in the day, and she had no idea why, until then.

“I was surprised,” she said.

“It’s up to me to validate and affirm why you are here. It’s something we should do every day with our students,” Dr. Brown said.

“I am here to interrupt the negative,” he continued, adding the suggestion that each teacher say something positive about a student before they say anything else.

“It’s a way,” he said, “to create a safe, respectful community.”

Dr. Brown continued the discussion he had with students, about the importance of language in the work they do. Not only when they are communicating with students, but also in the broader sense when it comes

to the language used in student handbooks, descriptions for jobs and board policies.

“If we are asking students to think about what words they are using, we have to do the same,” he said. “What we think leads to culture, and we want to create a culture of love.”

Are you ready? Camp Poco will be here before you know it

That’s right, Camp Poco, now in its 68th year, will be here before campers know it and there is nothing better to help get over the winter doldrums’ than thinking about jumping into the Pocantico Hills pool or enjoying the fun at the Camp Fair.

Camp Co-Director Kerry Papa guarantees campers will have fun when the six-week summer program starts on July 1.



“Whether you are new to camp or are back for a tenth season, we are all looking forward to camp,” Ms. Papa said, noting her countdown to camp calendar on this day indicated there were 160 days left to the start of the summer fun. (Even less now!)

She joked that in the camping world in which she is enmeshed, they have a saying and hashtag, #tenfortwo, meaning camp directors spend ten months planning for two months of activities.

“But” she said, “all that planning is what makes those two months so memorable and amazing.”



The energy and excitement for camp at Pocantico begins to build at the start of the new year among both campers and camp staff alike.

“Everyone involved in the camp,” Ms. Papa said, “is a family and they share that excitement, and it is the thing that makes the camp such an amazing experience for all involved.”

This year Camp Poco will run from July 1 through Aug. 9. There is already a plethora of activities that will be returning, including athletics, court sports, arts and crafts, hiking and wilderness activities, aquatics, and games like Gaga and 9 Square. There are also the special events that have been put on the calendar, such as Jersey Day, Crazy Hat Day, Crazy Sock Day, Tie Dye Day, Halloween in July, camp outs, Color Wars, and field trips. Not to mention a Ninja obstacle course, Day Rock, and a visit from the Bubble Bus.

“We bring our campers out into the world on field trips, for activities and events,” Ms. Papa said. “There are day hikes and field trips to local museums. We will be visiting the Liberty Science Center, which is new this year.”

“All year you hear about it,” Ms. Papa said as she overhears students talk about their camp experience or their excitement to getting back to it.

Campers also have an opportunity to make new friends as non-resident students also can attend and join the fun.

“They make new friends, it expands the community,” Ms. Papa said.

“We couldn’t do this without the support of our board and administration,” Ms. Papa continued.

Demand for the camp has increased in the past few years and a decision was made to offer an Early Bird Registration just for those who live in the school district. Residents will have an opportunity to register beginning on Monday, February 5, starting at 7 a.m. An Open Registration period for

others will begin on Monday, February 26, also beginning at 7 a.m. Registration for both groups is done online only at pocanticohills.org.

“We encourage anyone who wants to attend to sign up as soon as the window opens,” Ms. Papa said. “As groups fill, we will establish a waiting list. Last summer camp was filled to capacity, and we want everyone who wants to come to camp to be here.”

And for those who are wondering, the color of this year’s T-shirt will be . . . you’ll have to wait and see!

A Message from the Superintendent

Thank you so much to the Pocantico community for their support and participation in this year’s One Poco Night! We had an amazing turn out amongst our families who shared wonderful food and traditions that reflected their proud heritage. It was an informative, and delicious, evening and I offer my special thanks to Principal Adam Brown, with the assistance of Sheila DePaola, for their work in putting the event together.



One Poco Night is a way for us to celebrate the richness and diversity among our students and staff. Earlier this month we enjoyed a visit by educator and speaker Dr. Luvelle Brown. Dr. Brown spoke to our middle school students and our entire staff introducing everyone to different ways they can connect with one another at a deeper level. The goal, he said, is to gain an understanding of others and who they are and to celebrate the range of diversity that exists throughout the school.

He was not the only guest that has visited our school. We have once again begun our monthly visits from our chess instructors. The game has proven to be very popular among our students we thank Harold Scott and Abby Marshall for their monthly instructions in helping students to learn the game. Additionally, we had staff from the Lower Hudson Regional Information Center (LHRIC) Senior Facilitator Kelly Nocca and Technology Support Specialist Tara Finneran step into our classrooms to introduce

students to various coding concepts. The two are helping both our teachers and students as we begin to implement new technology instruction into our curriculum.

Have you noticed that days are getting a bit longer? It won't be long before spring is here! In the meantime, I encourage our families to engage in our community as much as possible and for our students to continue the amazing work they have been doing.

Rich Calkins
Superintendent of Schools

Checkmates, instructors guide students around the chess board

On Jan. 12, instructors Harold Scott and Abby Marshall moved around the school like pieces on a chess board. They also brought with them their knowledge of the game and were excited to share what they know with the next generation.

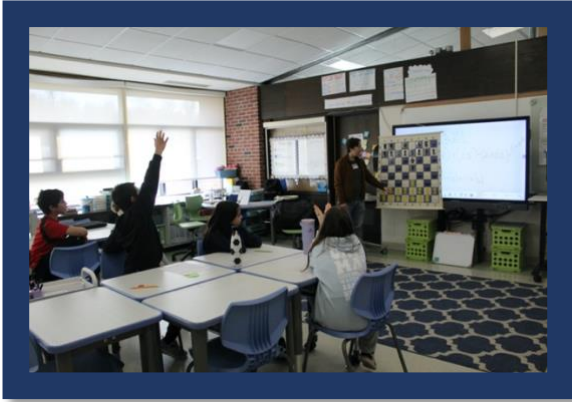
The chess enthusiasts were there to help the elementary students learn more about the game, in the first of many visits that will take place in the upcoming weeks. The two have become part of the school community and have been visiting for the past five years.

“You want to protect the center of the board,” Mr. Scott reminded a group of third graders.

After students correctly answered some of his questions, Mr. Scott told him how impressed they were with how much they know about the game.

“The important thing is to play a lot of chess so you will become better,” he said.





And that's just what students did. They broke into pairs, set up their game pieces, and were soon engaged in the strategic game.

Mr. Scott himself began playing at a young age, learning from his father and sister. By the age of 10 he was playing in chess tournaments and for the last several years has been teaching others

the game. He has even co-wrote a book on the topic, "Winning the World Open."

"I learned so much from it," Mr. Harold said of the game. "I used some of it in the business world. You learn how to make better decisions and it helps develop a growth mindset."

For fifth graders Dax O. and Eric L., who took a moment to pause their game, they said they liked chess because it's fun and it makes them think.

"I like how you are always thinking about strategy all the time," Eric said.

Both students are in the after-school chess club that meets once a week and has a waiting list as it filled up so quickly.

"I like it just for the fun," Dax said.

The two were among a group who had just heard from Ms. Marshall, a winning chess champ who has travelled to China and twice to Turkey to compete in tournaments.

She had introduced the fifth graders to the concept of a Double Check, a strategy she called "a powerful tool."

"It's a checkmate in two different ways," Ms. Marshall said, as she showed on a hanging board how it could be done. It's something she has used in her own games and a move that helped her win a state tournament.

She said using this tool in games might result in a player losing a piece to their opponent, but they ultimately win because there is a second check that is there.

Ms. Marshall said she was introduced to the game in Kindergarten.

“I loved the deeper levels of knowing the game, and it’s fun,” she said of what kept her playing.

She said she enjoys teaching children how to play the game because they can learn so much from it, including how to think critically, how to be competitive and how to win well.

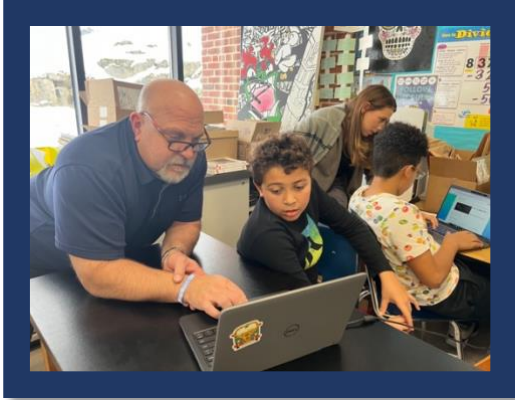
Students take control—Don’t worry, they’re learning to code!

The scenario was the challenge to navigate a blue monster through a room to reach the candy prize. Without the assistance of the fourth-grade students at the controls, the monster would have been stuck not going anywhere.

Thanks to the help of Lower Hudson Regional Information Center (LHRIC) Senior Facilitator Kelly Nocca and Facilitator Tara Finneran, students learned how to make the monster move and have fun doing it!



Ms. Nocca and Ms. Finneran spend two days per month visiting the Pocantico Hills Central School, where they plan alongside teachers and then push into their first through eighth-grade classrooms to support teachers and students in coding, or computer programming. The students use Tynker, a simple, easy-to-learn coding platform. In elementary classrooms, the assignment was to use block-based coding to give the character, or as referred to in Tynker, the actor, step-by-step instructions to navigate the room and meet the objective — getting the candy!



“They are learning foundational concepts,” Ms. Finneran said, adding that middle school students are using Python, a more advanced text-based, but still easy-to-use coding language.

Educational Technology Director Alana Winnick explained that LHRIC staff will be visiting the school twice a month to train teachers on coding, so they feel comfortable instructing their students.

The LHRIC is a division of Southern Westchester BOCES. They also work with students to introduce them to basic coding concepts and help them get used to the terms and technology used in coding.

The initiative also helps support the school’s Extended Learning Opportunity’s Coding Club, led by Marina Lombardo, which meets once a week after school and has proven to be one of the most popular programs for students.

Ms. Winnick explained that New York State has developed new computer science and digital fluency standards that have been put into effect.

“We are in a period of adoption right now,” she said. “We noticed the largest gap within the coding standard, prompting our efforts to integrate it across all grade levels.”

"We're taking proactive steps; that's where it all began," Ms. Winnick said, adding the district’s board has also been very supportive. "There's a sense of excitement from everyone involved."

Additionally, Ms. Winnick explained that coding will be integrated into the existing fifth through seventh-grade technology rotation schedule. This setup allows students to benefit from a semester dedicated to focused technology instruction.

In the elementary grades, she said, the instruction will be built into the curriculum to provide students with some exposure to technology and coding.



“An eighth grader has already expressed interest in taking a coding class when they get to high school next year,” Ms. Winnick said.

“It’s just fun to learn,” William D., a fourth grader in Dawn Lebenson’s class, said of coding as he manipulated the blue actor around the virtual room.

“You are given these little challenges,” Ms. Finneran told students, noting how they were supposed to figure out the appropriate code to have the actor walk and jump around obstacles.

Tynker has both text-based and block-based coding. In the block-based format, students drag instruction blocks, such as “walk” or “jump” and then stack the blocks on top of one another. They can view the main page to see if their instructions were correct in getting the actor to do what they wanted it to do.

“I like it because it’s fun and you get to learn skills about it,” student Emilia P. said of coding. “It’s fun because you get to program it. You have to be really specific.”

In Amie Doane’s fourth grade class, Ms. Nocca assisted students who ran across an issue — they could not get their actors to walk the correct number of steps before jumping over a blue block. She explained how in some instances they had to use “if” statements in their code, as in, “if” this happens, then “do” this.

“We are going to stop and think about what we need to do,” Ms. Nocca instructed students, who suggested a sequence of instructions like “walk,” “walk,” “walk,” “jump,” hoping it would get the actor to move the appropriate number of steps before jumping over a block.

“We’re debugging,” a student noted, sharing the technical term coders use when they troubleshoot an issue.

As the class watched Ms. Nocca's actor walk to and then hop over several blue blocks and finally eat the candy, another student exclaimed, "We did it!"

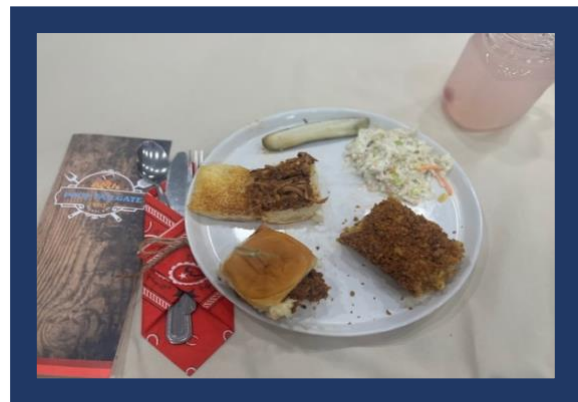
A Peek at Poco



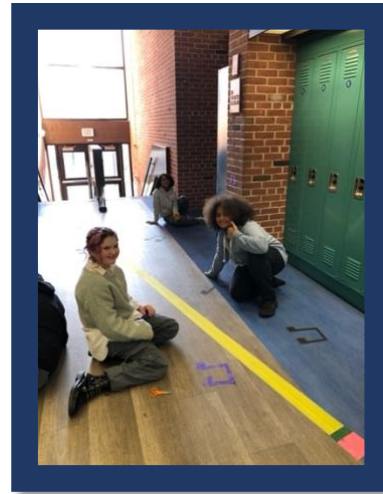
Restaurant Week!



This year students created the Poco Tailgate BBQ, serving lemonade, Longhorn Mac & Cheese, Pitmaster Sliders and Apple Rodeo Pie. Mmmmm!



Tape Art



There is no end to items that can be used to create something new and fun! Just ask our sixth graders who had a unique art project: Drawing with tape along the middle school hallway floors and walls. The assignment, done individually or in a small group, was to select a classroom and "draw" something they would find in that particular room.



Upcoming Events

Feb. 1, 2024, Board of Education Meeting, 7 p.m.

Feb. 10, Operation Valentine

Feb. 19, President's Day, District Closed

Feb. 20-23, Winter Recess

For more information visit our website, www.pocanticohills.org

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