



THE LEADER

A man of integrity and compassion

By LAURA SCHOFER

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Greg Ingino, executive director of the Woodward Children's Center in Freeport, believes that if you provide a loving and nurturing environment, anything is possible.

Ingino sees the potential in all children, and he has dedicated his life to helping kids who are challenged by social, emotional and behavioral issues. He is a quiet leader, someone whose actions speak louder than words.

For all that Greg Ingino has done for children in Freeport and beyond, and for his vision of a better world, the Freeport Leader proudly names him its 2016 Person of the Year.

Ingino, 61, began his career as a special-education teacher at a public school in Mastic, in Suffolk County, but when a position as a special-education teacher opened at the Woodward Children's Center in Freeport soon after, he took it.

The Woodward Children's Center, founded in 1957, is a school for children with emotional and social challenges. The school provides education as well as therapeutic treatment for young people ages 6 to 21.

"I was a 23-year-old kid when I arrived here 38 years ago," Ingino said.

Despite the challenges of working with special-needs children, he found ways to interact with his students in a less formal educational setting that helped them open up. He played basketball and baseball with his students and took the time to listen to their stories.

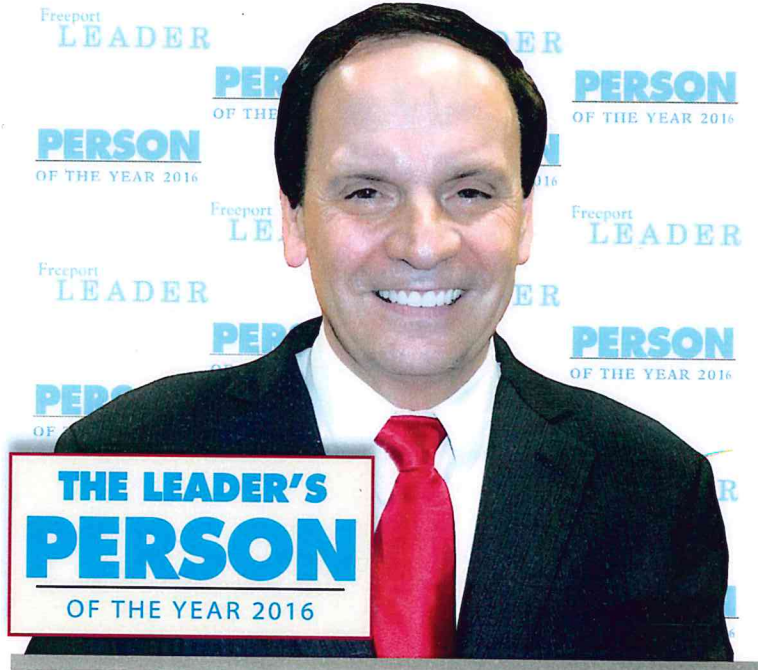
"My heart went out to them. Now I understand," he said. "You must reach them before you can teach them. Our students know if you are sincere."

"Greg has a vision," Ken Dodenhoff, a former colleague and one of his closest friends, said. Dodenhoff, now a teacher in the Sewanaka School District, worked briefly at Woodward. "He looks out for troubled children," Dodenhoff said. "Year after year, I'd go back and see the kind of progress he was making with these kids. He's very inspirational."

Ingino taught on the elementary and secondary grade levels before becoming a vocational teacher and job coach. Ingino used his background in the food-service industry to help students learn practical skills as well as to explore

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GREG INGINO
Executive director,
Woodward Center



Greg Ingino

a possible career path.

"He took pride in teaching technical skills — how to shine shoes, be a barber or hair stylist," Deb Ingino, Greg's wife, said. He taught wood shop and found that tactual learning "had a way of reaching these kids," she said.

Ingino became the Woodward Children's Center executive director six years ago. In that time, he has worked to create a safe, nurturing atmosphere in which children can thrive. "This is a home, not just a school," Ingino said. "I want people to feel good about coming here."

"Greg used modeling in the school," Dodenhoff said. "It wasn't just the appearance but also the character of the building he wanted to change. Greg took a cinderblock building and made it more beautiful."

Today the center is "more professional looking," Ingino said. The center is freshly painted, and there is new office furniture. The hallways are filled with children's art-

work, including a mural created by Woodward students and artist Emmett Wigglesworth on the meaning of community. There is also a contemplative garden with a small reflecting pool that occasionally is home to a family of ducks, in what was a concrete inner courtyard.

Ingino has also expanded some of the vocational spaces — including a sewing center and a new media room that includes a 3-D printer. There is also a gym filled with equipment and a full-service kitchen.

Under Ingino's leadership, the Woodward Center has refined its mission, with more focus on education, therapeutic intervention and family support. The center revitalized its curriculum, added technology, including smart boards and iPads in its classrooms, and bought current books. Students can receive Regent diplomas.

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mas. They also can receive vocational training. Most importantly, they learn the social and emotional skills necessary to face life's challenges.

"It's called PBIS — Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports," Ingino said. "We teach appropriate behavior and praise with positive rewards."

"When I was a kid and naughty, he always wanted to talk it out," Melissa D'Acunti, Ingino's daughter, said. "He didn't punish me. He was very level headed, wise and logical. He's this calming presence."

Ingino's calm presence works with the children he encounters at Woodward each day as well. "We had a boy come through our doors that had been through five different programs. He had drug and gang problems," Ingino explained. "But we worked with him. He went to Nassau [Community College], then to Hofstra [University], received a B.S. in engineering and became involved in the [Reserve Officers' Training Corps]. We met his needs and helped him turn himself around."

"Greg is a real advocate for kids," Danielle Colucci, the Woodward Center principal, said. "Students return all the time to say hello. He has touched so many lives."

Colucci recalled how Ingino helped one student who had no appropriate clothes for a job interview. "He took him shopping for



GREG INGINO with volunteers who helped paint a fence at the Woodward Center this summer.

Laura Schofer/Herald

clothes," Colucci said. "He just always seems to know what everyone needs."

"I can't speak highly enough of his dedication to the Woodward School and its mission," Ivan Sayles, a Woodward board member, said. "No one cares more deeply for those kids than Greg." Ivan became involved in the school after he

took a tour with Ingino and was "so moved by everything done there."

Sayles, a local restaurateur, offered to teach cooking classes. "And then he reeled me in," Sayles said. "He is an inspiration, and I found my involvement there to be addicting. He knows how to be a leader."

"He knows how to connect with people," George Singfield, the board chairman emeritus, said. "He is a team player, not a person who is interested in self-promotion. I think the best word for Greg is mensch — a real genuine human being. I've known him for 20 years, and it has been a pleasure."