

education

Bellesini Academy

by **Larry Flynn** photo by **Kevin Harkins**

Since 2002, tuition-free Bellesini Academy in Lawrence has served as a haven for 60 of the best and the brightest boys in the city, sending 100 percent of its graduates to private high schools. There was only one problem, according to head of school Julie DiFilippo. “Girls in this community need other opportunities for education,” DiFilippo says.

With community leaders, donors and the faculty all urging the academy to make the jump, Bellesini opened its doors to 15 sixth grade girls from Lawrence on July 20, the first day of the school’s summer session. Fifteen additional female students will be enrolled each school year until the girls school reaches 60 students, equaling the number of boys.

One of these girls, Jeimy Javier, couldn’t wait to get started.

“When I heard there was an opening, I got really excited,” says 11-year-old Jeimy. “I went to my mom and asked if I could be in the girls school, and she said ‘yes.’”

Jeimy knows that Bellesini will be much more rigorous than the public school in Lawrence that she attended, but said she is looking forward to the challenge and developing her passions in science and photography.

“It’s going to be different,” Jeimy says. “But I want to get more out of school. I want to get challenged so I can work harder and prepare for the future and be like my brother.”

Jeimy’s brother, Jhoneidy Javier, 18, graduated from the academy in 2011, attended St. John’s Prep in Danvers, and will begin his freshman year at Haverford College in Pennsylvania on a full four-year scholarship beginning in September.

“My favorite part of [my] experience at Bellesini was the community and the work,” Jhoneidy says. “Once I entered St. John’s Prep, I could really see the effect of this work ethic that you develop during four years at Bellesini Even though I had started in Lawrence public schools, by high school I was on par with most kids who had a private education.”

How does Bellesini accomplish this? Students come to the



Top: Jeimy Javier (left) is an enthusiastic member of the first all-girls class at Bellesini Academy in Lawrence. She will be following in the footsteps of her brother, Jhoneidy, (right) who graduated from Bellesini in 2011 and is now a freshman at Haverford College in Haverford, Penn. Bottom: Christian Bova, a Bellesini Academy alumnus and a freshman at St. John’s Prep in Danvers, plays chess with his younger brother, Brady, who is a current student at Bellesini.

academy 12 hours a day, 11 months per year for classes, mandatory after-school activities and evening study. The parent partnership program, which requires families to volunteer at the academy, helps, too.

DiFilippo points to Bellesini's affiliation with the Catholic Church and the strong alumni presence as important factors.


"For us, [being Catholic] is a wonderful opportunity to connect values and morals to education. It's about school culture and setting high expectations," DiFilippo says. "It's always a big adjustment coming [here] in fifth grade, but you have the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders and alumni here who are great role models."

Christian Bova, 14, graduated from Bellesini in the spring and is entering St. John's Prep this September. He now sees himself as a mentor to the younger students.

"It's cool seeing what it's like from an alumni's point of view," Christian says. "We've always been the little ones. Now we can tell the students that we understand what they're going through."

Christian has plans to either write a book or to be an entrepreneur, but first he expects to spend his summers giving back to the community. He returned for the academy's popular three-on-three alumni basketball tournament and says he also will continue to help out at Cor Unum, one of two local charities where Bellesini students perform required community service during the school year.

Adams Lopez, an eighth-grader, says he is looking forward to returning to Bellesini as an alum, but he's even more excited to share the Bellesini experience with his sister, who is part of the first sixth-grade class for girls in school history.

"I'm really happy she can have all the same opportunities I have," Adams, 13, says. "It's like my second home here. Friends you make here are friends forever. Once a Bellesini student, always a Bellesini student." 

Bellesini Academy | Lawrence, Mass.

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