

East Fishkill *Living*

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Teresa Arzuaga

A Mental Health
Advocate

Photo by Louisa Vilardi

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Meet **Teresa Arzuaga**

Family Services Inc.
Board Member and Mental
Health Advocate

*By Jeanne Cotroneo Darrow
Photos by Louisa Vilardi*

Teresa Arzuaga experienced firsthand the positive impact Family Services can make in people's lives, especially regarding mental health.

Hopewell Junction resident Teresa Arzuaga is a board member of Family Services Inc., a nonprofit that brings people together to find the support they need, improve their lives and build stronger, safer Hudson Valley communities. She's experienced firsthand the positive impact Family Services can make in people's lives, especially when it comes to mental health.

CITY ROOTS

Born and raised in the Bronx by her devoted Puerto Rican parents, a duo married 62 years and counting, Teresa is the baby of the family. She inherited her drive from her hardworking parents, dad, a union maintenance worker in Manhattan commercial office buildings, and mom, a hospital union worker and radiology receptionist. "That's how they raised us and put us through school," says Teresa, who attended Adelphi University and the Metropolitan College of

New York before pausing her studies to raise her three children. The single mom of three earned her bachelor's in liberal arts with a major in psychology and a minor in social science from the College of New Rochelle when her youngest, Kayden, was in second grade.

LIFE IN SUBURBIA

Teresa has been living in Hopewell Junction for five years now, having long known she wanted to move to the suburbs. "I always loved getting out of the city," she says. "I knew at some point in my life I would do it." Her early retirement from Cablevision in 2017 made it easier to finally make the leap to homeownership outside the city.

Rethinking her post-retirement career options, she focused on what she loved: children and animals. She landed a rewarding position with the New York City-based Schwarzman Animal Medical Center as a client communications manager. "We help animals live their best lives and save many lives every day," she says. "It might not be human lives, but animal lives are just as important."

A TOUGH TRANSITION

While today she's found her footing, it wasn't without bumps in the road. Kayden was 12 when they moved to the area, and the transition to a predominately white school was difficult for the biracial young man. "He went from being the majority to the minority with few classmates who looked like him," she says. He had little in common with peers in his new school and found it difficult to form connections.

Besides feeling like a fish out of water in a community vastly different from the one he grew up in, the pandemic then hit and added to his difficulties. Online school became a significant obstacle for Kayden, as he has struggled with ADHD and ODD since the age 6. He began skipping online classes and was in jeopardy of failing seventh grade by the time the school year ended. "All he wanted to do was go back home," Teresa says.

With the help of a teacher's assistant, he did pass seventh grade and went on to eighth. By age 14, depression and unspecified mood disorder were added to his diagnoses. In ninth grade, he experienced two traumatic events outside of school that led to a diagnosis of PTSD as well, which further distanced him from school and sent him into a constant state of fight or flight, Teresa explains. Now failing in school, her concerns grew as Kayden's truancy issues persisted.

Teresa tried everything to get him to go to school, including meeting with a case worker from Dutchess County's Division of Youth Services upon recommendation from the school. But "there was nothing anybody could say to get him to cooperate," she shares. He entered the Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) Diversion Program, which aims to help youth avoid a full court-mandated PINS. Participants meet weekly with a probation officer and could be sent to a judge for noncompliance. Still, Kayden had no fear of getting in trouble or going in front of a judge. Something else needed to click for him.

ENTER FAMILY SERVICES

Luckily, she was finally referred to Family Services' SNUG program, which focuses on youth who are at high risk for involvement with gun violence. Two of the program's mentors came to Kayden's probation meetings and connected with him immediately. "These guys came in, told their stories and a light just went on for Kayden," says his mom.

A year into the mentoring relationship, Family Services nominated Kayden and Teresa as the SNUG Program Family of the Year and invited them to create a video sharing their experience. That video was played at the organization's biggest fundraiser, catching the

attention of the board of directors. Soon after, she received a call with an invitation to join the Family Services board, chosen for her determination and personal understanding of their clients' needs, certain to help direct the organization's path forward. Teresa accepted, knowing she'd be helping to ensure that more families get the help they need when they need it, especially when it comes to mental health.

Now in her third year of serving as a board director, she is fully versed in everything the organization has to offer. "It's a one-stop-shop for social services," says Teresa, pointing to program areas that include Behavioral Health, Victim Services, Family Support Services, Youth Services and Community Safety. Their Family Partnership Center, at 29 North Hamilton Street in Poughkeepsie, annually welcomes 45,000 to 70,000 individuals and families from Dutchess, Ulster and Orange counties in need of vital resources such as nourishing food, legal aid, primary health care and youth programs, which are offered onsite by partnership tenants.

"It is considered a national model for community building," says Teresa, who is hyper-focused on mental health. "From counseling for survivors of domestic violence and gun violence to outpatient therapy, we are intimately connected to the mental health needs of our clients and our community and work diligently to end the stigma against seeking professional help."



Now, as a board member, Teresa is dedicated to ensuring other families receive the help they need.

Teresa is grateful that son Kayden found the support he needed and now looks forward to his future.

Photo courtesy of Teresa Arzuaga.

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We would like to thank **THE DARLIND COMPANIES** for bringing you this cover story.



As a mental health advocate, Teresa strives to end the stigma against seeking professional help.

MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATE

One of their newest initiatives to address the mental health crisis is the Fifty2 End Stigma program. According to Mental Health America, over 52 million people face mental health challenges every year, and only half of them receive professional support. So last fall, Family Services launched a campaign in which participants could walk or run 52 miles to raise money (\$52,000 was the goal) for the organization but also awareness—about both the stigma of mental health conditions and the available support. More than 230 people registered for the challenge, and Family Services exceeded its fundraising goal by \$8,000.

“We want the community to know that you shouldn’t be ashamed of anything you’re feeling, and you can reach out for help,” says Teresa, who last year was one of the campaign’s top fundraisers, securing \$1,675 in donations. She exceeded her goal of \$1,500, thanks to donation matching by her sister. The campaign, now an annual one, is expected to only keep growing.

This year, Family Services is expanding its mental health services to children ages 3 to 17. “Accessible mental health treatment for young people is crucial,” Teresa explains, as “untreated mental health conditions will follow children into adulthood.”

With Kayden, now 17, wrapping up his GED and planning to enroll in trade school this year, Teresa is looking forward to the future with her family—now including four grandchildren—and to contributing even further to Family Services. “I want everyone, not only young people, to know that help exists in our community and that it’s accessible,” says Teresa. “There’s an open door that you can just walk through if you’re struggling and need help. We’re here for you.”

If you or a loved one need immediate support, call or text the Dutchess County Helpline, at 845-485-9700.

Learn more at familyservicesny.org. ♦

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