

PROGRAM: Project WOW

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For Sylvia Ocasio, youth project manager for JEVS Human Services, a passion to improve lives



TIM TAI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

by Phil Anastasia | May 13, 2020

When it came time for Wilson Rivera to stand in front of the class and tell his story, the woman who changed his life watched him from the back of the room.

She was struck by a strange sense of familiarity.

“I saw me,” said Sylvia Ocasio, a youth program coordinator with JEVS Human Services, a nonprofit social services agency based in Philadelphia.

Rivera believes there’s something fitting about that. When he looks at Ocasio, he sees the person he aspires to be — even after he dropped out of high school, and got arrested three times, and sold drugs, and lived on the streets, and held his cousin as he took his last breath, the victim of gun violence.

Or maybe especially after all that.

Rivera’s story is one of success — he’s earned his GED and entered the workforce, volunteered at churches and food banks, and interned back at the same JEVS program, Project WOW (World of Work), that set him on the road to recovery — and he’s one of hundreds whose lives Ocasio has helped.

Now in her 26th year with JEVS, which has a broad range of education, training, health, and rehabilitation programs, Ocasio “embodies the mission of this organization,” said Bill Lynch, president of the JEVS Orleans Technical College campus, where students learn building construction skills. “She has this incredible ability to reach young people, to motivate them and get them on the right path.”



Sylvia Ocasio (right), an assistant program manager at JEVS Human Services, provides "tough love" for students such as Wilson Rivera (left) in JEVS's Project WOW (World of Work) program. TIM TAI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ocasio helps to oversee the Project WOW program, which offers a free, 24-week session of skills training, job placement assistance, and GED test preparation for 18- to 24-year-olds who did not finish high school.

Lynch said Ocasio refers to herself as the “mother” of the program, although she’s no soft touch for excuses, alibis, or sob stories.

“She has no problem putting them in their place,” Lynch said.

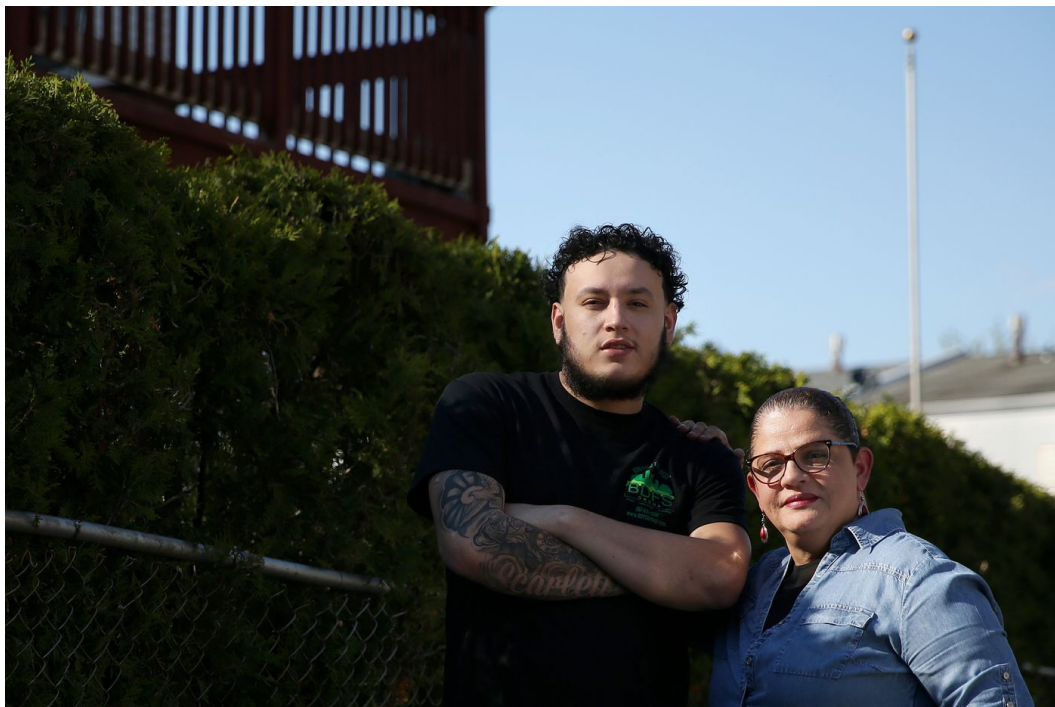
The 23-year-old Rivera can confirm that.

“She’s not afraid to show up on my doorstep with a belt to whip my behind,” Rivera said.

Ocasio calls it “tough love,” although she seems to have an inexhaustible supply of curiosity and concern for the young people that join her program.

“I used to be one of these young people, on the same streets,” the 60-year-old said. “I look at them and I always wonder, ‘What is their story? What happened to them? What kind of support did they have?’

“I became determined to help. I want them to make it in this world.”



Wilson Rivera (left) says Sylvia Ocasio (right), an assistant program manager at JEVS Human Services, found the "light" inside him. TIM TAI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ocasio works with around 50 young people a year. But something about Rivera struck home for her, particularly when he moved his classmates to tears with his tale of missteps, regrets, and struggle for redemption.

“I said, ‘I’m going to be part of this success story,’” Ocasio said.

An athlete his whole life, Rivera entered Father Judge High with aspirations of becoming a basketball star. He dreamed of playing in college, and maybe even at the professional level.

But his parents’ divorce, an aversion to schoolwork, and the lure of the streets led him to drop out before graduation. He was arrested for armed robbery and weapons charges for the first time as a 19-year-old. He was arrested two more times and, by his own admission, was headed farther down a dangerous path when a friend told him about Project WOW.

“No excuses,” Rivera said. “I made those decisions. They made me who I am today. I’m 23 and I feel like I’ve lived more than a 40-year-old. I held my cousin, looked in his eyes when he took his last breath. That could have been me. Somebody might have held me when I took my last breath. Without Project WOW, there would be no Wilson. I didn’t know I had the light inside me. Miss Sylvia brought it out.”

Rivera earned his GED and completed JEVS training in its property maintenance program, with an eye toward a career in construction. He has begun to work in the field, although restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have limited opportunities.

“He’s an amazing young man,” Ocasio said. “He had a lot of anger. He needed help. He needed direction. I would call him, ‘Don’t tell me you’re tired, don’t tell me you’re sick. Get to class.’”



Wilson Rivera (center, light shirt) served as a mentor to another class at JEVS Human Services' Project WOW program. JUSTIN WINDHEIM

Ocasio said she tries to use encouragement and accountability to build trust with wary, suspicious young people, many of whom have felt betrayed by adults in the past.

“They want to succeed,” Ocasio said. “They want a better life. They just need support. They just need to be shown the way. It’s not complicated, but it can be hard. But if you stay with them, stay involved, let them know you are there for them 24/7, they can do it.”

Lynch said Ocasio’s “secret sauce” is her tireless devotion to the young people in her charge.

“I’m always joking with her, ‘Did you get some sleep? Did you remember to eat?’” Lynch said. “She’s bringing them baby formula and diapers at all hours. She works around the clock.”

Born in Chicago, Ocasio moved with her family to Puerto Rico and lived there until she was 9. She’s been a Philadelphia resident ever since and has devoted her adult life to service.

“I look at it as my purpose in life,” she said. “This is me doing something to make the world a better place.”

Ocasio saw something special in Rivera from the start of their relationship. But she was floored when he stood in front of his class at Project WOW and recounted his journey.

“I saw his passion,” Ocasio said. “I said, ‘He reminds me of me.’ He was so eloquent. I knew how much he cared about changing his life and trying to help others change their lives.”



Sylvia Ocasio (right), an assistant program manager at JEVS Human Services, said Wilson Rivera (left) "reminds me of me." TIM TAI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Now the father of a young daughter, Rivera is engaged to be married. He food-shops for his grandparents, checks on his mom, and has begun mentoring a new Project WOW class. He said he wants his life to reflect the woman who saved it.

“I tell these young people, ‘I can be the only proof you need,’” Rivera said. “Look at my life. Look what she did for me. And that drives me to try to do for others what she has done for me.”