

Women in Action: Providence's Hillary Salmons is national leader in after school programming

By Patricia Andreu / Special to The Journal

Posted Sep 19, 2019 at 7:42 PM

Updated Sep 22, 2019 at 2:11 PM

“We can move mountains if we’re all working together in an orchestrated way,” says Salmons, and she’s done just that as executive director of the Providence After School Alliance, which runs high-quality middle school and high school enrichment programs that are hailed as a national model.

PROVIDENCE — Looking back, Nicholas K. Ong describes middle school as “the lost years.”

“I wasn’t focused on academics or my community,” Ong says during a recent phone call. “I was oblivious and unaware of the world around me.”

It wasn’t until his freshman year at Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex in 2015 that the teen’s outlook completely changed. That’s when he enrolled in The Hub, a free afterschool program for high schoolers run by the Providence After School Alliance (PASA).

Through The Hub, he signed up for a course taught by DownCity Design in which he helped brainstorm and build a play structure at Warren Street Park in South Providence. The course not only earned him high school credits, but it also unleashed his desire to improve academically and become involved in the community.

“It’s amazing how much you can change your mindset of the world by being given these opportunities,” says Ong, who is now a freshman at Brandeis University. “PASA is the reason why I’m here [at Brandeis] right now. They gave me this opportunity to expand my horizons and learn more about what’s around me. They led me to my success and to understanding more about my education and to chase my education, not wait for it.”

That’s a compelling testimonial about the power of effective afterschool programming, particularly in a city like Providence that’s been besieged by negative news about its public schools.

For Hillary Salmons, 63, executive director of PASA, it's further proof of the huge impact afterschool programs can have on the lives of students and communities.

"Everyone who's in the afterschool field is driven and motivated by enriching the lives of young people," says Salmons. "I think the youth really appreciate the fact that we've hired a team of caring adults who put them at the center of their practice. It's what student-centered learning is supposed to be all about. We didn't just discover that. Our field has been doing that for years."

Salmons has been intimately involved with PASA since its inception. The program was launched in 2004 after Providence became one of five cities across the country to receive a \$5-million grant from the Wallace Foundation to create a coherent afterschool system that would provide high-quality courses to disadvantaged youth. Bank of America became PASA's largest local investor with a \$1-million grant.

"Afterschool programming is really important for learning and developmental support," says Priscilla M. Little, senior consultant for The Forum For Youth Investment, headquartered in Washington, D.C. "In afterschool programs, there's more freedom and opportunity to experiment with different pedagogies and different contents in a way that the boundaries of a school day often don't [allow]."

Then-Mayor David Cicilline assembled a team of local experts and organizations, including Salmons, to identify the greatest needs and to develop a long-term plan. What emerged was The AfterZone, an afterschool program designed specifically for Providence's public middle schools.

"We had (even before PASA started), and still have, one of the best afterschool communities in the country," says Salmons, citing organizations like the YMCA, the Boys & Girls Clubs, Youth In Action and New Urban Arts, among many others. "But we weren't really organized in a way that was easy for parents to access. And there was inconsistent quality."

Cicilline asked Salmons to take charge of the new program, and she's never looked back.

"I love start-ups," says Salmons. "I'm pretty good at organizing, managing, recruiting good people and tapping people's talents and putting them to work. We can move mountains if we're all working together in an orchestrated way."

And move mountains she has.

PASA's AfterZone currently operates in five Providence middle schools and has a yearly enrollment of 1,560 students, as of 2018-2019. They work with more than 50 local organizations and instructors to develop course offerings — from sports, to arts and

STEM — tailored to each school.

PASA not only supplies free dinner, transportation and access to top-notch classes to students who participate. The nonprofit also provides professional development to teachers and conducts quality control of courses to maintain high standards and keep students engaged.

“We’re competing with hanging out at home, playing video games and wandering around town goofing off,” says Salmons. “So, we’ve got to make sure our customers want to stay in these rundown, miserable buildings, despite the fact that they’re kind of sick of school. So, we’ve got to make sure we have courses that have meaning.”

“We try to make it a lot of fun,” adds Robert Randall, PASA’s director of middle school initiatives. “We give [students] a lot of leadership opportunities and set high expectations and let them rise to meet them.”

For Jadelyn Santos, now a senior at Juanita Sanchez, encountering PASA’s AfterZone in sixth grade made her feel like a kid in a candy store. Instead of heading home after the bell, she enrolled in Hip-Hop and Food and Fun classes that encouraged fitness and healthy eating. Her parents were thrilled that she was in a safe environment learning valuable skills.

“I believe in PASA so strongly,” she says, “because it gives you a whole range of programs you’re not usually exposed to. They really care about their students. And they make sure their programs are going to be beneficial to them in the future.”

Students haven’t been the only ones to take notice. PASA’s success with the AfterZone has made Salmons a leader in afterschool programming in the United States.

“Because of PASA’s national reputation for providing strong middle school programming,” says The Forum For Youth Investment’s Little, “they’ve been able to elevate the critical role that afterschool plays in middle school programming. Hillary’s a strong mentor, not only to her staff. But she also untiringly gives her time to communities across the country to advise them on how they should be building their systems.”

Little, who has worked in the afterschool field since 1997, has collaborated with Salmons on national initiatives and most recently on developing PASA’s latest strategic plan. How does she describe Salmons?

“Unlimited energy. Strategic. Visionary. Community leader. Calls people out when she needs to. She doesn’t pull punches, and you need that in a leader. I think PASA is an example of innovation. Hillary is always three steps ahead of everyone else.”

The Hub is a perfect example. Six years ago, Salmons saw the need to enhance the afterschool experience in high schools by creating courses for credit. Working with existing programs, she formed the Advanced Course Network of free classes that could earn high schoolers extra credits and potentially launch them on career pathways.

PASA was also asked to take over afterschool programs at Juanita Sanchez and 360 High School. Four hundred high schoolers participated in The Hub last year. And it keeps growing. This year, Hope High School became the latest school to join.

“I think everyone deserves to have the opportunities that kids in Barrington and East Greenwich have,” says Salmons.

The biggest constraint to enrolling more students is funding. A third of PASA’s \$2-million annual budget comes from the federal government. Roughly \$300,000 comes from city coffers. (“Mayors Cicillini, [Angel] Taveras and [Jorge] Elorza have been super supportive,” says Salmons.) And the rest needs to be raised.

“People often ask me: ‘Are you going to expand your numbers?’ I say, yes. Give me a quarter of a million dollars and I’ll go into another school.”

Straight talk and dogged determination have been hallmarks of Salmons’ professional life. After graduating from Harvard University in 1978, she moved to New York City in the aftermath of its brush with bankruptcy and became a community organizer, helping entrepreneurs establish nonprofits to provide needed services. Years later, she served as deputy director of CAMBA, a multi-service agency in Brooklyn.

Salmons lived in Japan twice as a corporate wife to her now ex-husband. (“I had to survive in Japan as a tall, opinionated woman. That’s not a culture that’s easy to survive in,” she recalls.) There she helped found Refugee International, a leading refugee advocacy organization, in response to the refugee crisis in Southeast Asia. She earned her master’s degree in public administration from the University of Oklahoma at U.S. Army Base Camp Zama, near Tokyo.

In 1996, she and her family relocated to Providence.

“We moved here because of the quality of life and the scale of the city,” she says. “It felt like a city that was really community-driven and democratic.”

Her work for the Health and Education Leadership for Providence (HELP), a consortium of local hospitals and colleges that invested in children’s health and educational initiatives, among other roles, solidified her belief in the need for equity in access to a well-rounded education.

“Education, to me, seems to be the crux of any economic development,” says Salmons. “The prosperity or success of a city means that all the young people are thriving and have skills and are contributing to the economy. So, it seems to me that education and afterschool learning are essential.”

Her philosophy lives on in the students PASA has touched.

“There are such high levels of poverty,” says Ong, the Juanita Sanchez grad. “We don’t have the necessary funding within our own families to pursue these big programs that would potentially cost hundreds of dollars for us. The fact that this is free for every student is surreal to me. Because there’s so much to be learned. And, it’s literally just one sign-up away from you unlocking your future by signing up for something at a Hub fair or a PASA fair and checking out a program and finding out what you really love to do.”

PASA classes for the 2019-2020 school year start on Oct. 2. For more information about PASA, go to mypasa.org

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