THE UNION SOUND

THE VOICE OF A SOUND UNION

Sept./Oct. 2022

Rondout Valley Federation of Teachers and School-Related Professionals

Volume 47, Issue 1

by Felice Degennaro

A CAUTIONARY TALE

If you had asked me three years ago if there were any signs, I would have said “No,” but then again, I wasn’t paying attention and was mostly consumed with my mother’s diagnosis of dementia. I can’t really share the cautionary part without sharing a bit of my tale.

In September 2019, my mother was starting to have hallucinations. My mid-week was focused on school and my weekends were spent traveling to Long Island to check in on my parents. By March of 2020, my mother had to be admitted to a dementia ward in a nursing home in my hometown. The bittersweet irony is that it was the nursing home that she once worked in as a nurse. She was well remembered by the remaining staff which helped in her transition. While I knew she was in good hands, each weekend I felt her slipping further away.

By June, her lucid moments were far and few between, but I felt so grateful that she still recognized me. For the first time ever in my teaching career, I packed my car on the last day of school and left to spend the summer with my mama. Everything in me said that our time together was limited. I canceled every engagement and every appointment, including my mammogram. When I ponder my regrets, this is not the moment that comes to mind. I truly do appreciate every last moment that I was able to spend with her. Even as I watched her fade away, she was still able to recognize me, until the day she couldn’t.

It is a most devastating feeling to see your mother completely frightened by the sight of you. I was (in her hallucinations) kidnapping the patients at the nursing home. However, when I

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President's Message

Dear Rondout Valley Community,

The RVF represents every single teacher, paraprofessional, and secretary in the district; about 350 employees.

For those of you who attended or watched the Board of Education meeting on October 11, 2022, or saw social media posts, you may have heard the analogy, “you can’t fit a square peg into a round hole” invoked a couple of times. I would like to stick with that analogy if I may…

We like when we are given round pegs and round holes to work with. Or square pegs with square holes. That makes our jobs easy. But we don’t get to choose who walks through our doors and we didn’t get into this profession for the easy reward. We like the challenges and satisfaction of the harder reward. We love helping round pegs fit into square holes, if they choose to. We love helping square pegs fit into round holes, if they so choose. We love helping round and square pegs learn to use their tools to change a square hole into a round hole, if they want. Or maybe change a round hole into a square one. It can be done. Sometimes, we help them feel supported about their decision to change the shape of their own peg into a square in order to fit into the square hole. Or changing themselves to a round peg in order to fit into the round hole.

Sometimes they don’t want to even be called a “peg” at all. They want to be called a “dowel.” And we don’t care, as long as they feel *safe, valued, and respected*, and are able to learn something new about the world or themselves that day. It doesn’t bother us that they’d rather be called a dowel than a peg. We value them and work with the dowels the same as we work with the pegs.

In rare circumstances, we have round pegs that want to fit in a star-shaped hole or a square peg that wants to fit into a diamond-shaped hole. Occasionally, we even have pegs and dowels that don’t want to fit in a hole at all. And sometimes, just sometimes…they want to create their own holes and pegs in whatever shape they dream of.

We even have our own RVF members that would rather be called “rivets” than spikes, dowels, or pegs. And we acknowledge and support them, as well. They also deserve to feel safe, valued, and respected coming to work every day.

This is our mission and our vision. These are our values. Regardless of each individual's personal opinion in this school district, every peg, dowel, rivet, or whatever anyone chooses to be called, should feel safe, valued and respected and have the dignity to realize the full potential of their dreams here in Rondout Valley. That is our charge.

Growth and change are sometimes painful, especially for adults, who hold a comfort in traditions. There’s a certain reminiscent nostalgia that surrounds traditions, as adults are often flooded with childhood memories. Changing tradition and making new memories doesn’t make me feel one bit less safe at Rondout. However, the failure to change some traditions with the changing times does indeed make some students and staff feel unsafe and undervalued. I don’t understand why we wouldn’t make the changes that make others feel included and safe, at virtually no existential expense to those who feel differently.

We are the RVF, and we educate rivets, pegs, dowels, spikes, students, or whatever they would like to be called. We respect and value everyone whether they are round, square, diamond, or star shaped. We help them learn to use their tools to fit into any shaped hole their hearts’ desire as they grow into anyone they choose to be. We believe in Rondout Valley’s mission and values and we believe in helping ALL students fulfill their dreams.

Sincerely,

Robert McDonough
RVF President

A Cautionary Tale, cont.

returned a few hours later, my mother greeted me with a hug, and then asked me to make three promises: to get a new car, to get out of the relationship I was in, and to go to the doctor for a check up because she said, “you look like you're in pain.” She had not only recognized me, but also saw me, saw my pain, in a way only a mother could. Then she told me it was time to go home. It was clear she wanted me to leave. So, I left the next morning to come back upstate replaying what I felt were our last moments over and over again. She passed away two days later.

I let a full year go by before honoring the promises I made to her. A FULL YEAR! I can’t say it was because I was consumed by work, or grief, or family drama, or a pandemic. All of which are true, but I also have to acknowledge the signs that I ignored. For so long I told myself that the pain over my heart was just heartbreak. I ignored it until it became palpable and I could no longer ignore it. I have to acknowledge that I was not making my own health a priority at the time. Any parent or caretaker can surely relate to the excuses that we can make; how we can convince ourselves that our needs are secondary.

Within days of my screening I was back in for more tests: ultrasound, MRI, biopsy – ok this is definitely not normal. Then I got the call: *you have breast cancer. It is highly aggressive and we need to start treatment.* There was very little time to process, but the end game was to hit it as aggressively as possible: six months of chemotherapy, surgery, then radiation. My oncology team warned me that my treatment would need to continue well beyond radiation given the stage of my diagnosis. In many ways, this helped me focus on the balance that I once lost. I feel proud to say that I’ve kept all three promises to my mama. I am working to get to a closer place of what feels “normal.” This entire process has changed my life in so many ways, some of which have been true blessings.

I've had lots of time to think about regrets and what-ifs. However, I’ve taken my lessons from them and they now serve me in moving forward. I choose to focus on healing and on all of the amazing people that have impacted my life on this journey. I choose to embrace all of the love and support I have received from family, friends, colleagues, the district, students I have had the honor of teaching, and the community.

I share my story as an urgent call to all of you out there that are neglecting self care. Yes, of course, I'm referring to doctors appointments and regular screenings, but I am also talking about just slowing down. Despite all of the responsibilities on your shoulders – yes, easier said than done – you can give more and carry more when you are taking care of yourself.

Find time to do what brings you joy.

Take time to quiet your mind and body, and just listen.

Take time to pay attention, because you are surely worth it.

Lucky!

by Kelley O’Connor

In late August 2021, my teaching team and I met at Arrowood to catch up and have dinner before the rush of school began. My dear teammate and friend, Colleen Vitti, arrived after having a biopsy earlier that day. Hers turned out to be what 80% of biopsies are labeled: “a breast cancer scare.” At that moment, I had three friends going through precautionary biopsies or scares. I announced in conversation that I was late in having my yearly mammogram due to COVID. Colleen informed me that she would hound me until I made an appointment. I knew she would, so I promptly scheduled one for mid-October. I am lucky to have a friend like Colleen. She saved my life.

I never really worried about breast cancer because I nursed both of my children, and more importantly, breast cancer doesn’t run in my family. I had my routine mammogram and by 8:15 the next morning, my doctor called to inform me that more images were needed because they saw something. More images were taken which produced the need to have a biopsy. Then I got the call I’ll never forget. Not only did the surgeon tell me I have breast cancer, but she also informed me that I have a very aggressive cancer with the worst outcome: Triple Negative Breast Cancer. Within that conversation, she said that I was lucky to have caught it at the earliest stage.

TNBC gets its name because it lacks the hormone receptors estrogen and progesterone. The cancer cells also lack the HER-2 protein. So, it’s triple negative.

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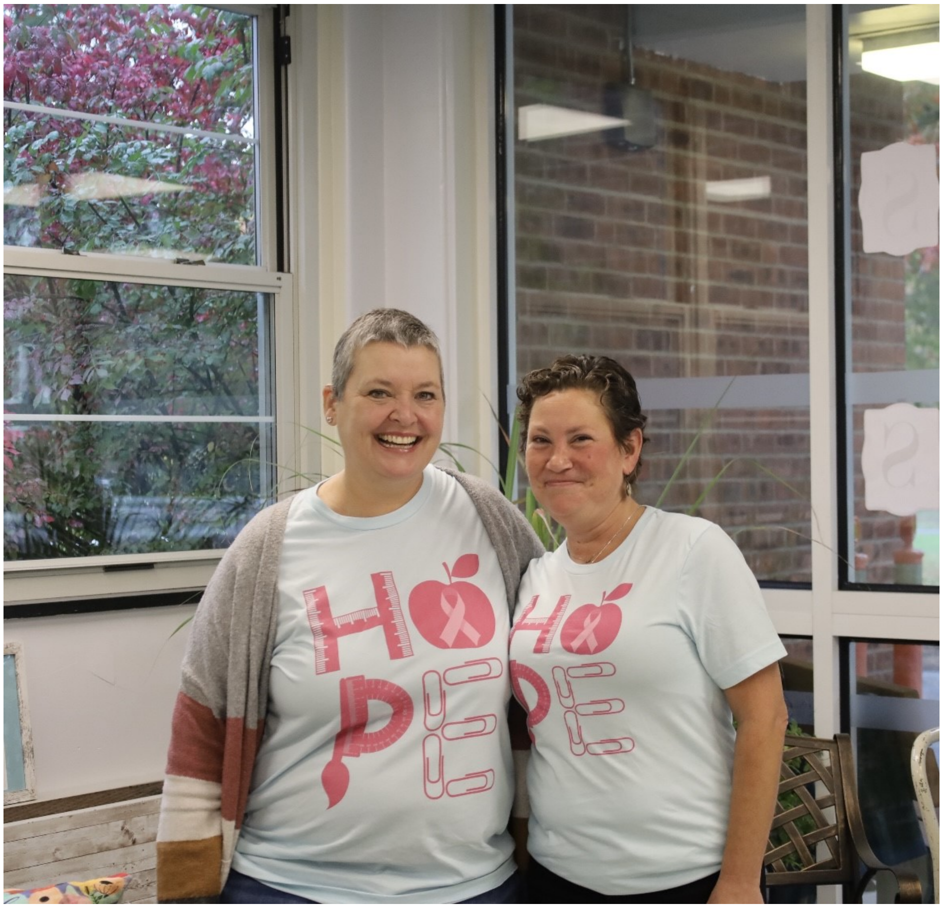
Lucky! cont.

After several visits, I did not have faith or trust in this local doctor, so I headed to Manhattan, to Memorial Sloan Kettering, one of the best cancer hospitals in the world. I chose the oncologist who is the head of TNBC at Sloan and does research at Weill Cornell Medicine. To have my health insurance accepted at Sloan and live within 90 minutes of Manhattan is luck.

Everything at Sloan is done based on protocol. My cancer was caught in stage 1A, which means that I would have surgery first, then eight rounds of chemo in four months, followed by twenty days of radiation. Between each phase of treatment, I was given four to six weeks to recover and rest.

My own primary care physician was confused by my course of treatment, as all stage 1 breast cancer protocols entail surgery followed by radiation [apart from stage 1 TNBC]. Since TNBC is the most deadly breast cancer, they treat it as aggressively as they would in later stages, which includes chemotherapy.



Felice and Kelley first met in 2008 when Felice taught Kelley's daughter and later her son. They created the Fireboat John J. Harvey project. Their friendship has continued, and most recently, they have joined the breast cancer sisterhood. They thank you for the opportunity to share their personal stories during Breast Cancer Awareness month.

As I stated, cancer doesn't run in my family. Aside from losing my best friend to stage 4 ovarian cancer at the age of 49, I have been spared the atrocities of cancer until now. Here is what I will tell you. I fought every second of every day! Chemotherapy is horror beyond comprehension. I developed two blood clots during the AC [Adriamycin and cyclophosphamide] chemo treatment. This treatment is also known as "the red devil." I had an anaphylactic response to the second chemo drug Taxol and needed to switch to a weekly Taxol which increased my chemo timeline to five and a half months. Breast cancer did not make me sick. I felt fine until chemotherapy. During chemotherapy treatment, I literally felt like I was going to die. I spent much of my time in bed and focused on my breathing. I told my kids, ages sixteen and nineteen, that I may have given them life, but they have given me the reason to live, fight, battle, and be a warrior through this disease. My sole purpose is to live a long, healthy life for my children. I have never worked so hard at accomplishing anything in my life. It may sound cliché, but you don't know how strong you are until you battle a terminal illness.

I completed my treatment in August. I was fortunate to have my radiation treatment at Sloan's satellite site in Northern New Jersey for four weeks, Monday through Friday. Radiation was a breeze compared to chemo. I was overwhelmed with offers from friends and family to drive me to my treatments. I created a Sign-up Genius and had such an overwhelming response that I had a back up driver daily and still had volunteers that were unable to secure a spot. I am a lucky girl!

I learned through this journey what love and friendship mean and the power that they hold. My family, friends, and so many of my dear colleagues held me in their thoughts and their hearts, messaged me when I needed them most, cooked for me, made me laugh, brought me to appointments, and most of all - they never gave up on me. I am lucky!

I'm sure you're reading this wondering how I can use the word *lucky* in my cancer story. A part of cancer has been a gift I wasn't expecting. There is not a minute of my day that I am not grateful! I didn't say that prior to cancer. Cancer has given me the gift of prioritizing the good, the positive. I don't get bogged down in negativity or worry. I don't know how many more minutes I'll be granted. None of us do. So, I am not willing to waste an ounce of my time worrying or having negativity rule my time. Time is the greatest gift we have. How will you choose to use that time?

My mantra is SHINE ON!

Breast cancer, but specifically TNBC, has given me a new mission in life. It burns in my soul to tell my story and the details of TNBC to the world so that we can attain the funding to find a cure. TNBC is the rarest of all breast cancers, accounting for 10-15%. Since it's the rarest, it hasn't been given the focus or funds for research, and therefore, it doesn't have its own treatment protocol. All that chemo I took wasn't necessarily the drug to fight TNBC, but that's all the doctors have at this time.

Here is where my passion rests. Triple Negative Breast Cancer is not only the rarest of all breast cancers, but also tends to impact younger women; I was diagnosed at 50 which is old for TNBC. It affects African American and Latina women 85% of the time. It has the worst outcome because once it leaves the breast tissue it's very difficult to control or stop. For example, I have a 91% chance of no recurrence at stage 1. Most TNBC is found in stage 3 and has a 65% survival rate. When someone doesn't have access to healthcare or screenings, then the chances of an aggressive breast cancer leaving the breast rise. African American women with TNBC have a 41% disparity in mortality compared to white women. Breast cancer in general has the largest disparity between African Americans and white people than any other kind of cancer. That is abhorrent and unacceptable.

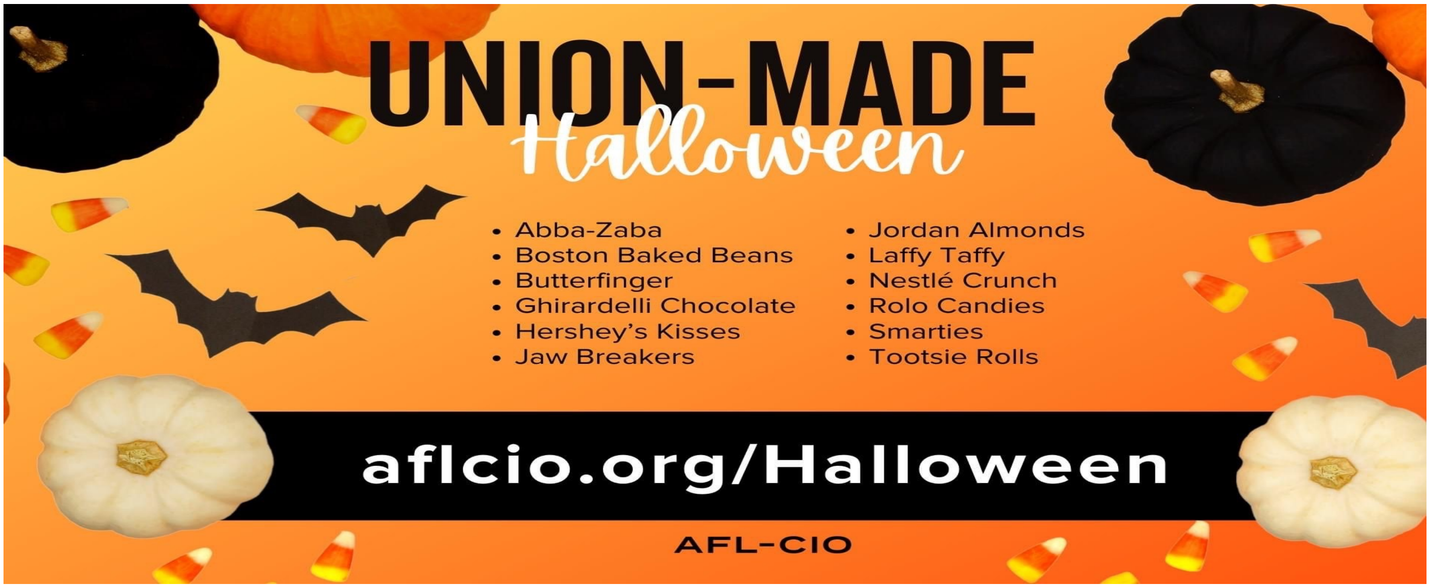
The pink in October used to annoy me. I was ignorant. I now know firsthand what breast cancer does to a person and to a family. One in eight women will be diagnosed in their lifetime. Every two minutes a woman in the US is diagnosed with breast cancer. I encourage all of you to get ALL cancer screenings. It may just save your life.

Recognizing Our SRPs

by Jennifer Hannis-McCain

HONEY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

At 10:30 on a Thursday night, I reached into my pantry and grabbed a pouch of orange-cranberry bread mix and started baking. Why? Because I have these incredible women that work with me and the students in my classroom several days a week. I hope they realize what a difference they make in all of our lives! I enjoy our conversations and how we can relate to each other. These connections are very important not only to me, but also to the students that they work with. Please help me in recognizing and supporting all of our school-related professionals. The work they do is immeasurable. Each day, they practice patience and show compassion, empathy, and understanding to all those they come in contact with. These individuals have a very special place in my heart and I would hope they do in yours, as well. Oh, and enjoy the bread ladies! You deserve it.



UNION-MADE Halloween

- Abba-Zaba
- Boston Baked Beans
- Butterfinger
- Ghirardelli Chocolate
- Hershey's Kisses
- Jaw Breakers
- Jordan Almonds
- Laffy Taffy
- Nestlé Crunch
- Rolo Candies
- Smarties
- Tootsie Rolls

aflcio.org/Halloween

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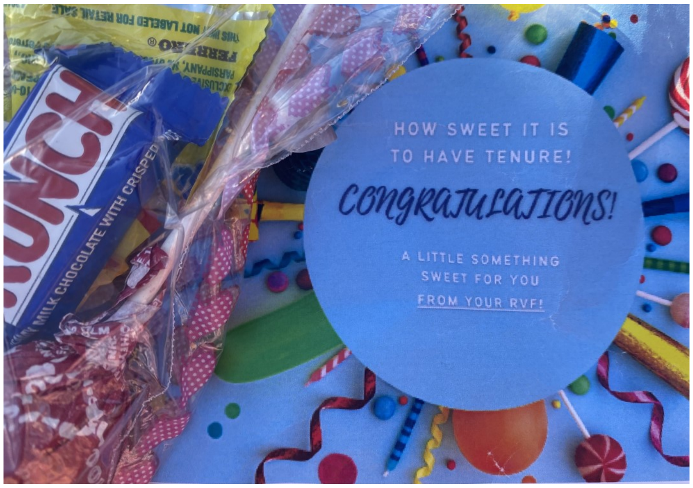
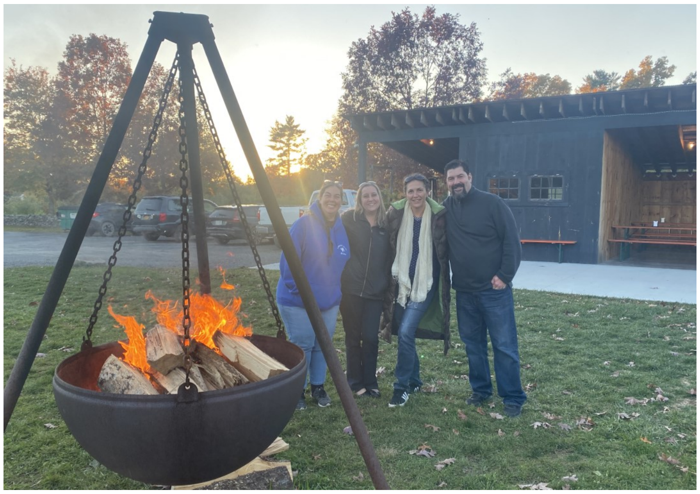
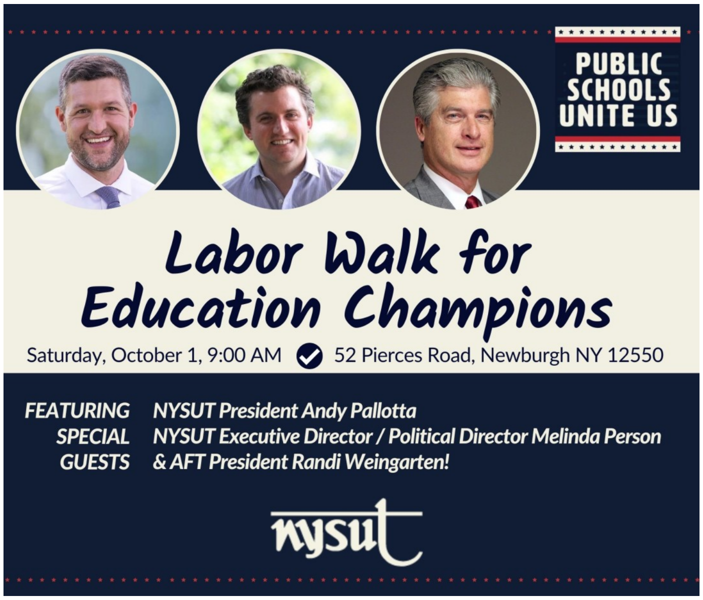
RVF New Member Mixer & Tenure Party





On Friday, October 21, the RVF hosted a New Member Mixer/Tenure Party at Westwind Orchard in Accord. Members gathered for a beautiful evening of camaraderie, celebration and welcome. Congratulations to all of our new and newly-tenured colleagues. In Solidarity!

Members Walking Together



PUBLIC SCHOOLS UNITE US

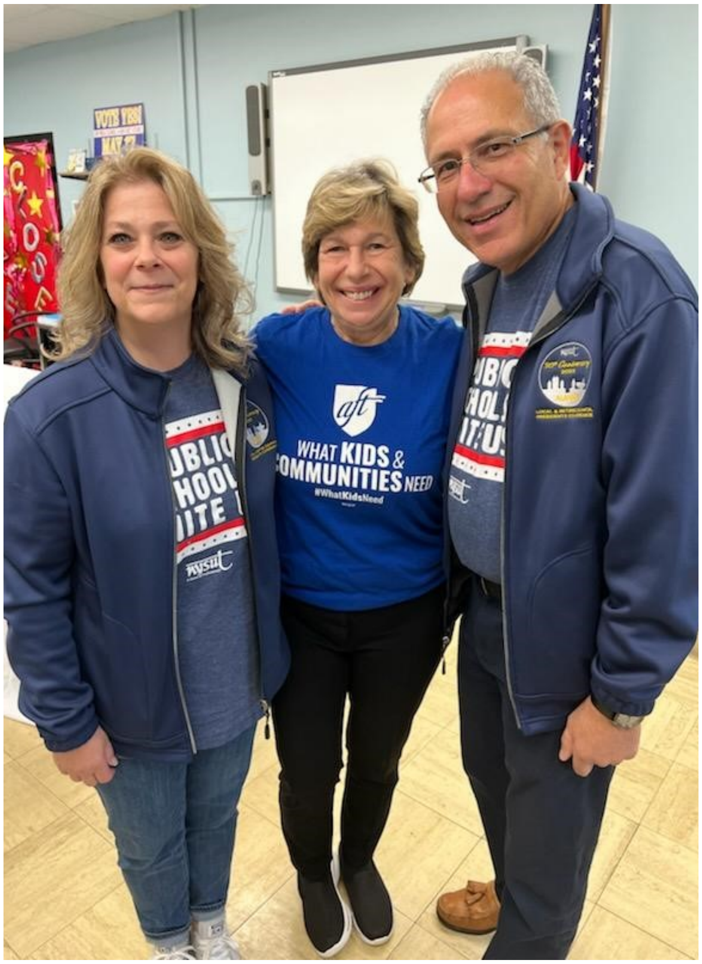
Labor Walk for Education Champions

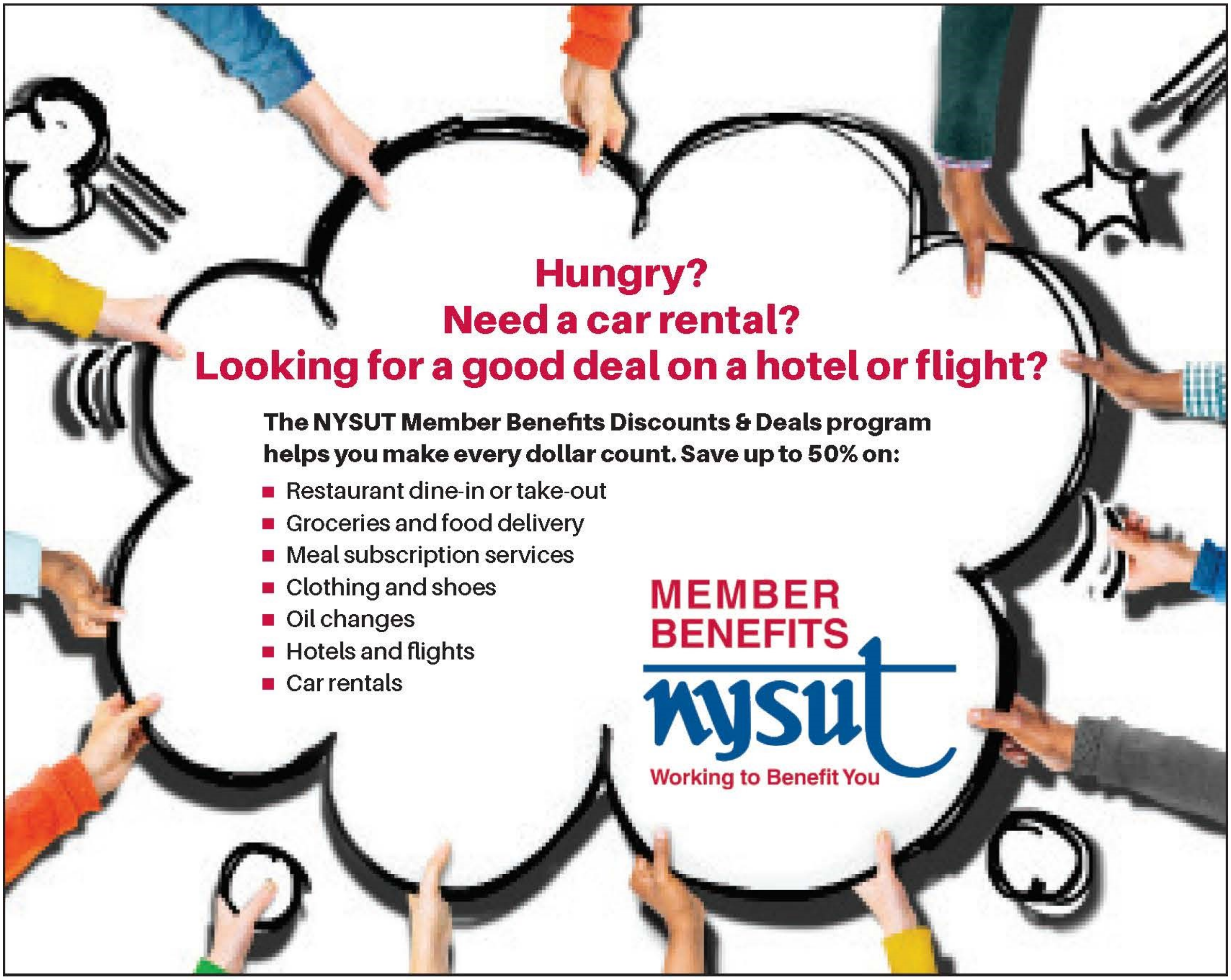
Saturday, October 1, 9:00 AM ✓ 52 Pierces Road, Newburgh NY 12550

FEATURING SPECIAL GUESTS
NYSUT President Andy Pallotta
NYSUT Executive Director / Political Director Melinda Person
& AFT President Randi Weingarten!

nysut

On Saturday, October 1, RVF Treasurer and Political Action Coordinator Kim McEvoy joined NYSUT President Andy Pallotta and AFT President Randi Weingarten in a labor walk to rally behind NYSUT-endorsed candidates for public office. Remember to vote for candidates who support public education and educators on Tuesday, November 8! Visit the 2022 NYSUT Voter Guide for a list of union-endorsed candidates.





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