

OPEN DOOR IN THE NEWS

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COMING FULL CIRCLE



From immigrants to executives, sisters give back to **Open Door Medical Centers**

Svapna Venugopal Ramaswamy
Rockland/Westchester Journal News
USA TODAY NETWORK

As a fifth grader in the early 1990s, Andrea Ruggiero didn't ask her parents if she could go on a two-day school trip to upstate New York that all her classmates were eagerly anticipating.

The reason: She did not own a sleeping bag.

For most kids in Chappaqua, that would have meant a quick run to the nearest Target, but for Ruggiero, it was an expense she knew her family could not afford.

Her parents, Wilson and Gloria Beltran, recent immigrants from Ecuador, cleaned homes for a living.

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TOP: Andrea Ruggiero, 37, right, vice president of community health at Open Door Family Medical Center and her sister, Grace Battaglia, 34, the director of marketing at Open Door outside the center in Ossining on Nov. 5. In the early '90s, the sisters arrived as young kids with their parents from Ecuador and were first introduced to Open Door in Ossining for their checkups and sick visits.

TANIA SARKISYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS
ABOVE: The Beltran sisters. **OPEN DOOR**



One sign of a warming Northeast is the sightings of warm-water fish — like juvenile black sea bass — in shallow waters off the New England coast. Black sea bass, like this one caught off Rhode Island in 2018, are being found in larger numbers off New England as ocean waters warm. The warmer waters may be helping to increase temperatures across the region, especially in coastal counties, data shows. STEVE SZYDLOWSKI/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

Northeast is warming faster than rest of US

'Our winters now are not
like our winters before'

Kyle Bagenstoss USA TODAY NETWORK

For one scientist, climate change in the Northeast announces itself in the abnormal appearances of warm-water fish — an abundance of mahi-mahi and unprecedented sightings in January of Gulf Stream flounder and juvenile black sea bass in shallow waters off New England.

"Nobody had ever seen that before," said Glen Gawarkiewicz of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts.

For another scientist, the phenomenon materializes in ocean temperatures, which have been rising for more than a generation, influencing coastal weather and pushing snowfall farther inland.

"Our winters now are not like our winters before," said Lenny Giuliano, state meteorologist in Rhode Island.

As water temperatures rise in the Atlantic Ocean and its connected gulfs and bays, the warmth may spread inland and generate temperature variations at the county level.

The water-to-land effect appears along the Great Lakes, which also are warming, said Mark Wysocki.

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OPEN DOOR
FAMILY MEDICAL CENTER
AND FOUNDATION

The Journal News Sunday (continued)

Open Door

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Bedford Road.

"When you live in a small apartment, you get to hear everything. As much as your parents may try to shelter you from adult conversations, you hear how difficult it is for them to afford the electricity or put food on the table," said Ruggiero, 37.

"So I just decided for myself that I didn't want to go. Grace and I did a lot of that," she said. "We didn't want to add additional stress or be a burden to our parents. We knew how hard it already was. You know, they were working multiple jobs."

Wilson and Gloria Beltran worked hard to improve the life of their family. And they succeeded. Both their daughters graduated from college and now work together as executives at Open Door Medical Centers helping other families not unlike their own.

Both say they could not have achieved their success without a lot of support.

Children of Ecuador

For Ruggiero and Grace Battaglia, 34, who arrived in the U.S. from Ecuador as young girls with their parents, the ability to empathize with others came at an early age.

But they received empathy from others, too.

The Open Door Medical Center in Ossining was one such place.

Founded in 1972, Open Door prides itself in building healthier communities through accessible health care. Today, the organization operates centers in Brewster, Mamaroneck, Mount Kisco, Ossining, Fort Chester and Sleepy Hollow, in addition to seven school-based health centers in the Port Chester and Ossining school districts, a mobile dental van in Mount Kisco, and a new dental practice in Saugerties.

"They were so accessible. They spoke your language and then took care of you whether you had insurance or not," said Battaglia, a director of marketing at Open Door, where she works in an office adjacent to her sister's. Ruggiero is the vice president of community health.

"We were happy that there was always a place that we could go where our parents understood what was being told to them and where they could take care of their health and the health of their children."

As a federally qualified health center, Open Door provides a medical home to nearly 57,000 Westchester and Putnam county residents every year. Two-thirds of the patients at Open Door live below the poverty line, with over 75% identifying as Hispanic/Latino. More than 43% have no insurance. Patients pay a sliding scale fee.

When Ruggiero and Battaglia first arrived in the U.S. with their parents, they spent the first few months living in Queens with relatives. On weekends, they'd visit relatives in Mount Kisco.

Within a year, the family moved to Chappaqua.

"Years later, when we asked (our parents) why they decided to move to Westchester, their first answer was, 'We wanted you to have the best education. We wanted you guys to have a good opportunity at a better life,'" said Ruggiero. "They wanted that American dream for us. They really wanted to make sure that we were positioned in a place where we would have positive opportunities."

Right from the start, the family felt welcome.

Neighbors reached out to make the



Andrea Ruggiero, 37, left, vice president of community health at Open Door Family Medical Center and her sister, Grace Battaglia, 34, the director of marketing at Open Door are photographed at their offices in Ossining Nov. 5, 2019.

PHOTOS BY TAMIA SAWYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS

family's first Thanksgiving memorable by bringing over a turkey dinner with all the trimmings.

The school system was also supportive, Ruggiero said, noting that apart from the sisters, there was only one other student who needed help with English language skills and was part of their ESL classes. Before long, the teacher started offering classes to the parents.

"To me, it never really felt like we were without much, because I didn't realize that our community had already taken us under their wing to say, OK, so there are some disparities here but we're going to help. And that was wonderful," she said.

Those experiences are what motivate the sisters in their work at Open Door. "I think that's what makes us so patient-centric. It makes us so thoughtful about what we do for others," she said. "I think because we realize that what you do for that person might mean even more to them later on in their life."

Deciding to give back

After a few years, the family moved to a slightly bigger apartment in Armonk and the sisters started attending Byram Hills High School.

When Ruggiero graduated from high school, Manhattanville College offered her a scholarship. She received a degree in psychology and her first job out of college was as an HIV caseworker for Open Door.

"I was responsible for putting in place the support systems that would allow patients to focus on their health," she said.

Ruggiero understands firsthand what such services meant to a family.

As teenagers, when their father started to show signs of muscular dystrophy, which would eventually leave him unable to work, the sisters served as his interpreters when he visited his Open Door physicians.

Battaglia, who also attended Manhattanville on a scholarship, graduated with a degree in finance. A stint at a finance firm, which required a lot of traveling, left her dissatisfied.

A few months later, a meeting with Lindsay Farrell, Open Door's president and CEO, at her sister's wedding would change her career trajectory.

On Farrell's suggestion, Battaglia accepted a job as a paid intern, as way of



Andrea Ruggiero, 37, right, vice president of community health at Open Door Family Medical Center and her sister, Grace Battaglia, 34, the director of marketing at Open Door, Ruggiero, who lives in Chappaqua and whose children attend Yorktown schools, said she sees Open Door continuing to grow.

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Battaglia, now a Bedford resident, whose children attend Byram Hills schools, said she immediately knew she was on the right track.

That sentiment was not surprising to Farrell, who has worked with Open Door for 35 years and who started as a volunteer driving elderly patients to their appointments.

"Both Andrea and Grace, they've really lived the story of so many of our patients who are new to the United States," said Farrell. "It's just wonderful when you can hire people who are sort of hooked on the mission and they stay — because it's not like you're getting rich working here."

Having experienced Open Door as both young patients and now as veteran managers, Battaglia and Ruggiero appreciate the value of the institution's work from both perspectives, Farrell said.

Ruggiero, who lives in Chappaqua and whose children attend Yorktown schools, said she sees Open Door continuing to grow in the coming years, particularly their in-school programs aimed at preventive care.

"Those programs are an incredible support to our families because the kids get taken care of right at the school. The kids don't have to miss days of school. The parents don't have to miss days of work," she said. "We can take care of physicals, vaccines, chronic disease-care like asthma in visits at the school."

For Elisa Doctor, who met Ruggiero as an eighth grader in Byram Hills, watching her friend's career path has been inspiring.

"Based on how smart and how hard-working she is and having all the opportunities at her fingertips, just the fact that she chose to work in a career that gives back to the community in such a meaningful way is inspiring," said Doctor. "It really is just incredible how it all comes full circle."

The sisters have had a few role models of their own.

It was, after all, a perceptive teacher who intervened when Ruggiero said she didn't want to go on that overnight class trip to upstate New York.

"We have a few extra sleeping bags," she assured a young Ruggiero.

"That school trip is one of my favorite childhood memories," she said. *Suzanna Venzagopol Ramasteamy coaxes women and power for the USA Today Network Northeast. Write to her at svenzagop@ohud.com*

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From immigrants to executives, sisters give back to **Open Door Medical Centers**

Swapna Venugopal Ramaswamy, Rockland/Westchester Journal News

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The Beltran sisters: Andrea Ruggiero and Grace Battaglia (Photo: Open Door)

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