Slides, Swings, Sunshine, Smiles: KS Celebrates Playground Ribbon-Cutting

Under the warm sun and with plenty of excited students cheering, the red ribbon was snipped, officially opening the Kensico School playground.

Valhalla families gathered early for the elementary schools’ joint picnic on Sept. 18 to celebrate the grand opening of the new space. While construction was completed a year prior, the district waited for COVID restrictions to loosen before a gathering was allowed outdoors on campus.

“Playgrounds create a community,” said Principal Matt Curran. “In addition to its use during school, I see families at the playground after school and on weekends. It fosters a nice sense of community. It’s wonderful for our students to have a beautiful structure to play on. It helps our children become healthier and stronger, and improves their creativity, reduces stress and increases healthy interactions.”

Homecoming Celebrates Viking Pride, Hope, Optimism

This year’s Homecoming Week was a phenomenal display of Viking spirit and camaraderie. It celebrated the values that make Valhalla unique: care, collaboration and kindness. Especially after missing last year’s festivities, the 2021 celebration highlighted a love for our community.

Every school held a Homecoming Spirit Week, where students used their creativity to dress up for events like Tropical Shirt Day, Cartoon/Superhero Day, Jersey Day, Color Wars, and Maroon and White Day. Valhalla Middle/High School also celebrated with an outdoor Pep Rally, where students encouraged and competed against one another in fun, laughter-generating and cheer-inducing games.

In addition to celebrating our talented student-athletes, the Viking Visits were a Homecoming highlight. Our senior athletes visited the two elementary schools and socialized with the younger students. It was heartwarming and inspiring to see them all together – some popped into classrooms, while others played games in the gymnasium, and many enjoyed repeating Viking chants together in the sunshine.
With a mindset geared toward continual growth and learning, Valhalla High School senior Jared Sonkin was named a semifinalist in the National Merit Scholarship Program.

Jared has been a Valhalla student since kindergarten and has excelled academically and with extracurricular activities. Musically, Jared plays the clarinet in concert band and the trumpet in jazz band. He has also participated in the New York State School Music Association’s statewide solo competition.

“Valhalla has a very good music program,” he said. “And there are lots of opportunities to go out and play at events.”

In addition, Jared is a member of the Academic Challenge Team, which reached the playoffs of the National Academic Championship in June. He is also in the school’s Science Research Program; his project is about using nanosensors for cancer diagnostics and is titled “Analysis of the Responses of a Carbon Nanotube-based Sensor to Estrogen Receptor Alpha.”

Jared has always excelled academically, has been intuitive and is passionate about his interests,” said Ms. Reis. “He seeks out opportunities to continue his growth and follow his passions.”

This year, Jared is taking a math course at Columbia University in Manhattan and will be applying to colleges. While he hasn’t yet selected a major for college, he wants to study a form of science that requires lots of math skills. He has enjoyed courses in those areas in Valhalla and wants to continue learning.
Valhalla’s 2020-21 Boys Soccer Team Earns Academic, Sportsmanship Awards

In addition to winning on the field, Valhalla High School’s boys varsity soccer team from the 2020-2021 academic year also won educationally and socially. The United Soccer Coaches recognized the Vikings with a High School Team Academic Award and a High School Team Ethics and Sportsmanship Award.

Every year, the Team Academic Award is given to student-athletes on soccer teams whose collective academic success exceeds a grade point average of 3.52 for the full year. The VHS team’s combined GPA was 3.39. The USC commended the Vikings for their "commitment to excellence in their studies."

Valhalla was one of 282 high school teams that was honored and one of 113 boys teams to be celebrated nationwide. A noteworthy statistic is that the Vikings, led by coach Sandra Prosperino, were one of only four teams in New York State — and the only team in Westchester County — to earn the remarkable achievement.

The Team Ethics and Sportsmanship Award is given to student-athletes who played fairly, showed sportsmanship and signaled positive behavior throughout the season. The Silver Award, which the Vikings won, is given to teams who accumulated between 11-30% of yellow (caution) cards and red (ejection) cards based on the number of games that they played.

Valhalla Welcomes Enthusiastic, Skilled New Staff Members

During the summer and fall months, the Valhalla Union Free School District welcomed a group of talented educators for the 2021-2022 academic year.

Valhalla is committed to acquiring top-shelf staff members who share our Viking values and will transition seamlessly into our schools. Please meet our newest additions. If you see them in the hallway, please introduce yourself!

Pictured:
- Claudia Balloni: VRS teacher aide
- Melinda Benanti: VHS social studies and ENL teacher
- Sally Byrd: KS teacher aide
- Elizabeth Byrne: KS library media specialist
- Bernadette Cuadrado: KS art teacher
- Orande Daring: WHS acting assistant principal
- Erin Geary: VHS English teacher (leave replacement)
- Alyssa Giordano: KS teacher aide
- Amanda Hernandez: KS speech therapist
- Rebecca Longabucca: VHS special education teacher
- Kelly McGoldrick: VMS physical education teacher
- Michele Mitchell: KS secretary to the principal
- Alandra Nichols: VRS teacher aide
- Jennifer Posner: VRS teacher aide
- Nasir Rashad: WHS teacher aide
- Anne Scally: KS special education teacher
- Kayley Tierney: VMS English teacher
- Lindsay Vanderheof: DO secretary to the superintendent
- Caroline Washington: VMS special education teacher

Not pictured:
- Jessica Gelfon: VRS teacher aide
- Denise Gomez: VRS/KS senior office assistant
- Tara Hammond: VRS teacher aide
- Susan Little: VRS teacher aide
- Cristina Taftnner: WHS world language teacher (leave replacement)

Junior Athlete Morgan Kruger Honored as Player of the Week

Collaboration and relationships are a big part of life for Valhalla High School junior Morgan Kruger and the girls varsity field hockey team. With the support of her team, Morgan, the team’s goalie, was named LoHud’s field hockey Player of the Week.

In a late September game against Sleepy Hollow, the Vikings put in a strong showing but lost by a score of 1-3. Nevertheless, Morgan racked up 27 saves that game — now a Valhalla record. Her athletic prowess earned her the coveted Player of the Week honor. Morgan was in the lead throughout the entire voting process and scored 43.1% of the overall votes in a five-athlete competition.

“It was insane,” Morgan said. “We were sitting in English class and we all started screaming. My friend said that I won and everyone clapped. It was so cute. Morgan began playing field hockey in seventh grade, she played the position of midfielder. In ninth grade, she joined the junior varsity team and became the goalie. In 10th grade, she became a varsity player.

Initially, Morgan became the goalie simply to fill a gap in the team’s roster. However, she ended up not only being skilled at playing that position, but she also blossomed into a strong leader. She is grateful for her teammates and the strong bonds they have formed over the years.

“I like the relationships between everyone,” she said. “We don’t always win, but there are games that we’ve lost — like the game against Sleepy Hollow — where it feels like we won. We’ve basically grown up together. Everyone is respectful, gets along and is close. That is what draws me to field hockey. It’s all a team effort. It’s not about one person, it’s about everyone.”

In addition, Morgan plays lacrosse in the spring, which she has done since sixth grade. During the winter season, she is the manager of the girls varsity basketball team. She also participated in the Helping Hands Club and the Valhalla International Fund.
Why I Teach: Richard O’Riley (Valhalla High School world language teacher)

Q: What makes Valhalla special?
A: Our district is an overall great place to serve as an educator. We are culturally diverse and offer a wide array of programs at each level, which prepares students for success in their post-high school endeavors.

Q: How many years have you been here? How long have you been an educator?
A: This is my eighth year as a proud Viking. I started my educational career during the 2000-01 academic year at a rural school. I also have many years of experience teaching in urban education and have worked as an adjunct Spanish professor at the college level.

Q: What courses are you teaching this year? What extra-curricular clubs/activities are you advising?
A: I am teaching five sections of Spanish – Level 2, Level 3 and College-Level Spanish. My seniors help organize and host an annual districtwide Hispanic Cultural Celebration Night. We are one of the few districts in Westchester to hold such an event. During past summers, I co-advised VHS’ Credit Recovery Newsletter and “Social Media” in its 42nd year.

Q: What do you hope your students know by the end of the school year? How long have you been an educator?
A: Traveling to Colombia with my wife and a group of students in 2019 on a summer research trip was the ultimate experience of connecting learners to the real world. Receiving emails and notes from current/former students and parents means so much and makes it worth it.

Q: If you weren’t teaching, what would your profession be and why?
A: Years ago, I actively pursued a career as a U.S. diplomat. However, after reflection, I decided to return to the education field. I enjoy the lifestyle that teaching provides, but who knows how the future might pan out. Live each day to the fullest and be true to yourself. If you are not happy, then do something that makes you happy. Do not be afraid of change.

Q: Share a fun fact about yourself.
A: I am the oldest of six and grew up in Albany and Rochester. We are a family of artists, musicians and a lot of personality. I have also lived in Texas.

Q: Feel free to share any additional relevant information.
A: I strive in such a way that others shine brighter.

Viking Highlights from Fall 2021

Missed some news throughout the Fall 2021 season? Catch up with our new Viking Highlights!

Valhalla Honors Former Youth Officer Valentino
Thank you to Valhalla’s former youth officer, Detective Laurant Valentino, for her years of service in the district. She protected and looked out for our students, while building strong relationships within the community. She was honored at halftime of a home game between the Valhalla Vikings and the Woodlands Falcons on Sept. 25.

Cross Country Team Excels with New School Record, All-League Runner
Valhalla High School’s varsity cross country team earned two special honors in mid-October. Sophomore Maya Richards was named an All-League athlete, while junior A.J. Shikapwanyahwa became the fastest cross country runner in Valhalla history with a new personal record of 16:44.
Spooky Celebrations Showcase Unity in Valhalla

Witches, cowboys, princesses and superheroes paraded through the hallways and around the campuses on Oct. 29 as Virginia Road School and Kensico School enjoyed Halloween together. After missing the festivities last fall due to the pandemic, students and staff members were eager to don their costumes, celebrate with each other and share many warm-hearted smiles.