

LOWELL HIGH

Students 'seen' at new school-based eye clinic

Center run by LCHC expands services

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LOWELL » Lowell High School senior Alice Mwangi knew she needed to get her eyes checked when she started using her phone to take pictures of the whiteboard in class. She used the zoom feature to blow up the image on her screen in order to see the teacher's notes.

"I also noticed that I was doing a lot more squinting in class," she said.

Instead of continuing to struggle, Mwangi came down to the school-based health center, located in the basement of Lowell High School, to get an eye exam. It's a service that the Lowell Community Health Center recently added to the existing suite of health care already available to students.

On Thursday, Mwangi was picking out frames for her new prescription lenses with LCHC optician Janet Berio.

"When I got my exam, I was like, 'I can see!'" Mwangi said. "It was cool. I got used to not being able to see, and I didn't know I could see more."

An exam, a prescription and a fitting for new eyewear all without leaving school grounds or missing school due to an off-site appointment was a big factor in Mwangi seeking help from the new program.

"To be honest, if this hadn't been accessible to



Dr. Brian Pietrantonio, an optometrist with Lowell Community Health Center, checks the eyes of junior Ghabryella Nascimento, during her visit to LCHC's school-based health center at Lowell High School on Thursday. The eye care clinic opened in October.

me, I don't think I would have followed up on my eye issues," she admitted, as she tried on a pair of black-rimmed, oversized frames. "This is very convenient because I am already here at school."

With a population of more than 3,000 students, Lowell High is larger than many towns in the commonwealth, and co-locating health care services to meet the needs of the in-house population is the goal of school-based programs like the health center, said Director Cindy Slaga, of Dracut, who is also a registered nurse. She's been with LCHC since 2016, and at the LHS center since 2018.

"A school this size needs to provide this care," she



Lowell Community Health Center optician Janet Berio, of Nashua, N.H., left, helps Lowell High School junior Ghabryella Nascimento select frames following her visit with optometrist Dr. Brian Pietrantonio, during her visit to LCHC's school-based health center on Thursday.

said, noting that there are also four school nurses in the building, who work for

the Lowell Health Department. "Last year we had

CLINIC » PAGE 7

The Five Minute Read

Jeanne D'Arc Credit Union announces new board chair

LOWELL — Jeanne D'Arc Credit Union announced the election of Naomi Prendergast, of North Andover, as the chair of the board of directors effective in January. She succeeds John Chemaly, who completed his term and will now hold the role as vice chair of the board.

"We are so appreciative of John's generous time and service to the Credit Union," said President and CEO Mark Cochran. "For the past 20 years John has supported our mission in the community to help our members make smart financial choices and we're happy that he has agreed to stay on and continue to support that mission."

Prendergast joined the Jeanne D'Arc board in 2010. She has served as the president and CEO of D'Youville Life & Wellness Community since 2004, and as the vice president of business development and community relations of the Carmelite System since 2021.

"It is an honor to serve as chair of an organization so committed to the mission of providing its members, from all economic backgrounds, with sound financial services," Prendergast said. "Our Board could not be more focused on the evolving needs of our members. Together, we look forward to finding new ways to help our members reach their financial goals."

Artist showcases work in interactive gallery showing

CHELMSFORD — The Chelmsford Center for the Arts presents the interactive gallery exhibit, "Say it Loud," featuring the work of local artist D'Wight Upchurch, with two shows today, from noon to 1:30 p.m., and 2 to 3:30 p.m., at 1A North Road. Upchurch's paint-

ings and drawings explore his understanding of himself and his world while coming of age as a Black man during the height of the civil rights movement. The event features live music and musings from the artist. Tickets are \$10-15. To purchase, visit bit.ly/3YLgppG. For information, call 978-250-3780.

Author discusses Industrial Revolution at LTC

LOWELL — Come down to the Lowell TeleMedia Center Gallery Tuesday, Feb. 21, from 7 to 8 p.m., 246 Market St., for Under-Discussion@LTC, a guest speaker series moderated by Jack Croughwell in front of a live audience. Bridget Marshall will talk about her book, "Industrial Gothic: Workers, Exploitation and Urbanization in Transatlantic Nineteenth-Century Literature." The book explores the tropes, themes and rhetoric of 19th-century literature that were used to portray the real-life horrors of factory life. No registration required for this free in-person event that will be recorded. For information, call 978-458-5400.

Art workshop for kids

LOWELL — Kids can learn about and recreate a masterpiece painting during the "Unleash Your Inner Artist" workshop at the Whistler House Museum of Art, Tuesday, Feb. 21, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 243 Worthen St. Join artist-in-residence Magdalene Stathas to learn about the historic birthplace of American artist James McNeill Whistler while recreating his famous "Whistler's Mother" painting. The free workshop is held in partnership with Lowell Kids Week, a week of nearly 40 free family activities that take place throughout the community during school vacation. Reservations are required. For information, call 978-452-7641 or email gdgain@whistlerhouse.org.

Clinic

FROM PAGE 3

2,998 visits from the LHS community. That included primary care visits, nutrition visits and behavioral health counseling."

Thanks to a \$25,000 grant from the Association of Clinicians for the Underserved Eye Health & Vision Services Program, that care now includes comprehensive eye exams, optical services, follow-up care and treatment of acute eye diseases such as conjunctivitis, dry eye, and trauma.

"We'll even fix broken glasses," Slaga said.

LCHC was one of only five community health centers nationwide awarded a grant during the funding cycle, and the nonprofit supplemented the grant money with other programming funds to outfit a full-service eye exam room within the existing space.

The LHS-based health center, as well as the one located at Stoklosa Middle School in the Acre, is funded through the Massachusetts Department



Lowell High School senior Alice Mwangi models frames that she selected as part of her visit to the school-based health center eye care clinic run by Lowell Community Health Center. The clinic opened in October, and offers on-site eye exams and eyewear to students.

of Public Health School-Based Health Center Program Grant and other funding sources, which includes

the school district providing the space that serves the student body. When the rebuild and

renovation project of the high school is complete, the health center will be located in the new Freshmen

Academy on the first floor right off the main entrance.

"Our future location will make us much more visible to the students," Slaga said.

Ghabryella Nascimento, a junior, had an appointment with Dr. Brian Pietrantonio, an optometrist who primarily works out of LCHC's offices on Jackson Street. He sees students three times a month for comprehensive eye exam appointments.

He positioned a phoropter, one of the tools used by optometrists to measure a patient's eye acuity, over her face, and asked her read the letters off the Snellen chart projected on the far wall. After her screening, Nascimento visited with Berio to select her new frames.

"This is an entry point to access care," Pietrantonio said, as he wiped down the equipment for the next appointment. "It's about removing all the obstacles. The kids are great. I really enjoy this. Something potentially as simple as glasses could be life-changing."

Students came in and out of the space throughout the morning, including Nophe

Vicheth, a junior, who was there to get a blood pressure screening by Lakhana Sann, of Lowell, a certified medical assistant and phlebotomist.

Vicheth said the comfortable environment was one of the many reasons she came to the center.

"It's comfortable, its accessible, it's co-located," she said. "I feel respected — they're very protective of the student privacy and confidentiality. I appreciate that piece of it, too."

Valentine's Day decorations still adorned a space filled with couches and comfy chairs. Helium-filled Mylar balloons were tied to a handle of a door on which a full-length Progress Pride flag hung. The colored stripes and symbols represent diversity and inclusion of the LGBTQ+ and transgender community.

"We're primary care and eye care, and counseling and all of that," Slaga said. "But we're also just a space that students know is safe. They can get a granola bar and a bottle of water and make it through the rest of their day. We're here so that they can stay in school."