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Leadership class inspires Blackstone mom to 'jump right in' to fiscal fight



Adrienne Nicoloro is a graduate of the Parent Leadership Training Institute at RiverzEdge and new member of the Blackstone Finance Committee. (VALLEY BREEZE PHOTO By SANDY PHANEUF)

PLTI project finds one parent at center of town's finance debate

By SANDY PHANEUF, Valley Breeze Staff Writer

WOONSOCKET - Adrienne Nicoloro didn't really think she was the type of person who would serve on a town board.

Nicoloro, a mother of two, certainly tried her best to be a good citizen and care about her community. She educated herself about local issues, and voted every election season. But she just didn't know if she had what it took to serve in government.

"I thought about it, but I didn't have the confidence to do it," said Nicoloro.

That was before she discovered the Parent Leadership Training Institute, a new program in Woonsocket that aims to help parents advocate on behalf of their children by becoming more involved.

The 20-week-long program started last January. And by May, Nicoloro was serving on the Blackstone Finance Committee.

"I didn't realize it would be as easy to join as it is," she said.

The fact that Nicoloro had finance experience, and that the town was getting ready to enter budget season two members short of a full committee, probably didn't hurt her chances.

Nicoloro, who works as a professional grant writer, spotted the announcement on the town's cable access channel. As requested, she sent in a letter of interest and her resume, and almost immediately received a call from Committee Chairman Norman Forget. She was asked to attend an upcoming meeting and give a presentation on why she wanted to join.

"It was a little nerve-racking," Nicoloro said.

It would be just the start of an intense, and sometimes contentious mission to serve her community.

"It was baptism by fire," she said.

Nicoloro was approved for a temporary appointment and immediately started attending a marathon of meetings focused on developing a recommendation for the town's fiscal spending plan for 2014. Entering at the height of the budget process,

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Nicoloro found herself immersed in a crash course on municipal government each night while her children slept.

She shared her story in an essay for her PLTI class titled "One Parent's Civic Engagement in Municipal Government."

"This level of commitment is necessary, as the committee's task is to be the eyes and ears of Blackstone taxpayers," Nicoloro wrote. "Such scrutiny is a critical part of our municipal government's checks and balances system, and the Finance Committee is dedicated to assuring the taxpayer that the due diligent process had been completed fairly."

A public hearing on the budget on May 13 lasted for more than five hours and on May 28, when the committee made its official presentation, around 250 taxpayers were in attendance. That meeting, in what turned to be a heavily debated budget process, lasted another five hours before reconvening the following day. Discussions on how not to over-burden taxpayers while funding for improvements in public safety, infrastructure and education led committee members to continue seeking more information. The result was a strained relationship with town administration.

"It may have felt invasive to them," said Nicoloro. "I think they felt like they were on the defensive."

Nicoloro said that as a result, Town Administrator Daniel Keyes has questioned the committee's role in town government, a decision she finds bizarre.

"We are all tax-paying Blackstone residents committing unpaid time and energy to review the town's finances and ask questions on behalf of the townspeople," she said.

Keyes did not return The Breeze's call for comment on the matter.

Despite the difficulties, Nicoloro said she's happy she made the decision to serve her town, and she credits PLTI.

"Instead of thinking about being actively engaged, I have become engaged in issues that are important to me and my children," she said.

In addition to her work on the budget, Nicoloro is running a grant writing class for PLTI students. This year, she's been asked to represent the Finance Committee in a feasibility study for a proposal to build a new senior center for the town.

She's also been reappointed for a three year term on the Finance Committee, and as a newly inspired parent leader, she said she aims to continue working on behalf of Blackstone residents.

"The Finance Committee wants to work with the town to make the process better for everyone," she said. "It's a great place to live, and it's about continuing to improve community life in Blackstone."



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