



# WELLESLEY FRIENDLY AID

Making an Impact for More than 100 years

PATTY LENZ BOVIE **writer**

tess, 92, who lives alone, attends a weekly luncheon and lecture with friends. Darren, 19, meets with his mentor to brainstorm ideas for his college essay. Michelle, 45, borrows a wheelchair for her visiting mother-in-law. Sheron, 61, needs help furnishing her apartment after becoming physically disabled. And Vasilisa, 7, packs a bathing suit and towel for summer camp.

All these people have two things in common. They all live in Wellesley, and all their lives have been enriched by the generous support of Wellesley Friendly Aid (WFA). Founded in 1898, this privately funded nonprofit organization helps hundreds of Wellesley residents of all ages each year. From summer camp scholarships for kids to college counseling for high school students to social luncheons for senior women to

assisting those who have fallen on hard times, and more, WFA is funded by generous Wellesley donors and run by volunteers who are “neighbors helping neighbors.”

Although Wellesley is primarily an affluent town, people don’t realize that many residents struggle to make ends meet. Deb Cogill, president of Wellesley Friendly Aid for the past seven years, said, “Our organization aims to fill gaps in local social services and safety nets. We try to support everyone from Barton Road to Dover Road and those in between.”

Here are the stories of a handful of people who have turned to WFA for support.

*right: Emmanuel “Manny” Reynoso Bernardo working at Wellesley Rec Camps*

PHOTO BY BRANDON FITTS







Wellesley Friendly Aid

## ALEX

ALEX KAZAKOV, 40, and his family moved from Odesa, Ukraine, an area that had been heavily bombed, to Wellesley in December 2023 for a better life. He and his wife, Anastasia, enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class at the Wellesley Free Library to improve their communication skills. When Alex told his ESL teacher, Wellesley resident Shelly Griswold, that he had two young girls, she recommended he look into WFA's camp scholarships. Each year, WFA provides scholarships to approximately 60 kids who otherwise wouldn't be able to attend summer camp.

Alex applied for a scholarship for Vasilisa, a second grader, and for Iryna, an eighth grader, to be a counselor in training. He and his wife were relieved when they got the news that both girls had been approved. Alex has been focused on building his website development and search engine optimization business.

*above: The Kazakov family (l to r): Anastasia, Vasilisa, Iryna, and Alex*

Summer camp allowed the girls to be with other kids for eight weeks and go on field trips like Tree Top Adventures and Canobie Lake Park—something they had never experienced before. The girls had daily bus pickups and drop-offs, which was critical since the Kazakovs don't have a car, and Iryna and Vasilisa had an opportunity to be outside, stay immersed with native English speakers, and make friends.

"We are very grateful and appreciative because it was important for Iryna and Vasilisa to have fun this summer. They are going through very big changes. Wellesley is a perfect place for our family because we are safe and have had support from our church, the food pantry, and Wellesley Friendly Aid. The girls must adapt to new conditions and intensively study the language, and camp provided this wonderful opportunity," shared Alex.



# DARREN

**DARREN JIMENEZ**, 19, grew up on Barton Road with a single mother from the Dominican Republic, an older brother, and a younger sister. With the support of WFA, he and his siblings also attended summer camp.

This fall, he will be a freshman at Bryant University in Rhode Island, studying finance. As a rising Wellesley High School (WHS) senior Darren reached out to Wellesley Connects—a college counseling program for first-generation students that WFA offers in collaboration

with the Wellesley Youth Commission. Managed by WFA Chair Regina Watts, PhD, the program provides WHS juniors and seniors guidance to make the college planning process a success. “Wellesley Connects gives students added support in selecting a college, completing the Common App, writing their essays, and filling out the FAFSA and scholarship forms,” said Watts.

Wellesley Youth Commission Director and Wellesley Connects Program Coordinator Maura Renzella works closely with Watts. Renzella noted, “If a student’s parents did not go to college, or if they

are first-generation parents who have gone to college in a different country, they may not know how to navigate the U.S. application process.” Wellesley Connects has a close relationship with the school counselors at Wellesley High School to ensure students in need have the guidance to navigate the college application process. They meet once a month and Wellesley Connects provides pizza, snacks, and water. “Many students are navigating this process on their own, so we try to give them the assistance they need,” said Renzella, Jimenez’s mentor.

Jimenez added, “I really didn’t know what I was doing when it came to the Common App. My mentor, Maura, was so kind and willing to help anyone who put in the effort. The whole experience was very very helpful.”

*left: Darren Jimenez throwing the discus at a Wellesley High School track meet.*



DARREN BOVIE

# EMMANUEL

**EMMANUEL “MANNY” REYNOSO BERNARDO**, 23, grew up in public housing with a single mother who had emigrated from Brazil. This year, he graduated from Trinity College with a degree in chemistry and a minor in applied mathematics. Now, he is pursuing his PhD in chemical physics at Columbia University.

Bernardo first discovered WFA when he was eight and went to summer camp on a scholarship. “I was a low-income immigrant kid in an affluent community. Camp allowed

*right: Emmanuel “Manny” Reynoso Bernardo (left) and Tom, his Wellesley Connects mentor (right).*



WELLESLEY CONNECTS



Wellesley Friendly Aid

me to be a kid like other kids. It gave me a childhood that I wouldn’t have had otherwise. It also gave my mother childcare over the summer so she could continue to work.” He liked his camp experience so much that when he got old enough, he became a counselor in training and worked his way up. “While I’ve held many leadership roles across recreation and beyond, I was particularly proud to run the gamut of involvement in the rec camps, from camper to assistant director, as a means of giving back,” he said.

When it was time to think about applying to college, Bernardo again turned to WFA for support. His mother didn’t have a strong command of English and she hadn’t gone to college herself, so she couldn’t help with the complicated process of college admissions. Bernardo would have been on his own trying to navigate the system if it were not for Wellesley Connects. “Not only were my struggles financial, but I had no adult I could rely on for guidance. Participating in Wellesley Connects allowed me to make informed decisions that had a real impact on my future, and I’m forever grateful.” He got a significant scholarship to Trinity College and paid for the rest of his degree by working multiple jobs, both during the school year and over the summer. “My mom didn’t have to pay a dime,” he stated proudly.



JOHN HARMON

TESS

TESS GRIFFIN, 92, has belonged to Friendship Circle, a popular WFA Program, since 2015. Established in 1949, this weekly luncheon gathering of senior women, held October through May, allows these Wellesley women, many of whom live alone, to socialize, learn something, and get out of the house. They are picked up by volunteers from the Wellesley Service League each Monday and driven to the Warren Building, where they enjoy a luncheon and hear presentations from musicians, authors, gardeners, etc., or do an activity or craft. Loneliness and isolation can be hard on the elderly, and Friendship Circle offers a way to connect with others.

Griffin, who worked as a nurse for years and now lives in Wellesley said, “The Friendship

above: Tess Griffin enjoying a magic show at at Friendship Circle gathering.

Circle programs are always very interesting. We had a woman from the Audubon Society talk to us about animals. Another makes quilts and showed us her technique. Sometimes we play silly games like bingo or trivia or do crafts. But I always look forward to Monday because it’s a social time when I can see the other members. For some, it’s the only day they get out all week.” Most members of Friendship Circle get a ride to and from the event, but Griffin drives herself and picks up a friend on the way. She added, “The women who run the meetings are so kind. They sit down with us and chat about how we are doing. It’s one of the best things about Friendship Circle.”

## SHERON

SHERON WHYTE, 61, was working full-time and driving herself to work when she had her first stroke, followed by another. She lost her speech, her mobility, and her ability to drive. Then, after being hospitalized for weeks, she lost her lease, her furniture, and everything she had ever worked for. She had no other choice but to move into senior/disabled resident housing, run by the Wellesley Housing Authority. By then she had minimal furniture and few resources to buy what she needed.

That's when Whyte reached out to WFA for emergency aid. Program Administrator Karen Mondell took the call. Whyte said, "From the minute I met Karen, she worked hard to find me dishes, storage bins, a

COURTESY OF WELLESLEY FRIENDLY AID



*above: The Wellesley Friendly Aid Association is located at 219 Washington Street in Wellesley Hills.*

rug, etc. She really helped me start over." Mondell also reached out to board members, people in her neighborhood, and listservs for donations, and followed up with folks to get furniture dimensions, photos, and set up delivery. Whyte added, "When a helping hand doesn't look down on you like you are charity, it means so much. I've been through a terrible loss, but what Wellesley Friendly Aid has done for me is nothing short of a miracle."

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

While WFA has positively impacted the lives of thousands of residents over the years, the organization relies on the generosity of Wellesley residents to sustain itself, both through financial donations and volunteer time. "I feel proud to be part of Wellesley Friendly Aid, and everyone who volunteers for the organization does too," said Cogill. But WFA can't make a difference without help. It needs yearly support to continue this valuable tradition of neighbors helping neighbors. **WW**

VISIT [www.wellesleyfriendlyaid.org](http://www.wellesleyfriendlyaid.org) for more information and to find out what you can do.