

## Believing Again

Past Temple Terrace and Busch Gardens, there is a special kind of high school. The school is a series of connected white-brick buildings in a 7-shape with black gates surrounding it. The exterior is polished, looking brand new.

In one of the conference rooms in this school's administration building, a bear of a man with hands like baseball mitts is rapidly talking about the animated penguin movie *Happy Feet*.

In this room with Viking symbols adorning the walls, this daunting figure asks me, "Have you seen it? Have you seen *Happy Feet*?"

Reluctantly I reply, "No, sorry. I haven't."

He smiles and says, "Oh man, it's so great! And you know," he continues in his gruff, raspy voice, "Let me tell you . . . that's who we are."

This is Dr. Anthony Colucci, the principal of Bowers-Whitley Career Center.

Bowers-Whitley differs from other local high schools in many ways. It is part of the Hillsborough County Career Centers which provide career preparation programs for at-risk youth. At-risk youth are determined by their likelihood to either drop out of high school or fail out. Walking around the school, teachers and students are gleaming with motivation like there is some kind of palpable energy to turn lives around, to get on the right track and stay there.

Dr. Colucci turns to me and says, "The thing about these kids is that, well, you tend to be what others think you are." He lowers his eyes and says, "Most of the kids at Bowers-Whitley come here in the first place because of self-esteem issues. Some of the issues even stem from the students' families."

Again, he looks at me sternly and repeats, "You tend to be what others think you are."

I want you to meet Jenny.

She's nervous and shy. Jenny tells me she used to go to Chamberlain High School. She was behind in school, making C's and D's. She didn't care about school. She

didn't care about herself. Jenny tells me that it seemed like no one was on her side. A member of her family once said to her, "You will never make it."

Jenny felt like giving up.

But then, she learned about Bowers-Whitley. She soon enrolled, and her life immediately changed.

"I have a passion for what I do now," she says, glowing, "Dr. Colucci makes me feel like I am a part of a family here. I'm training to be an administrative assistant, and I'm really happy."

On a tour of the school, Dr. Colucci and I walk through the Automotive Service class where all of the students wear red collared shirts, and then we cut through the Building Construction class where they all wear yellow collared shirts.

"The students get a certain sense of pride," Dr. Colucci says, "when they wear the shirts. The shirts make the kids feel like they are part of something. They make them feel validated."

They also feel validated by actually being interested in their courses. Besides Automotive Service and Building Construction, there are many more career programs offered at Bowers-Whitley, including Nursing, Interior Design, Early Childhood Education, and Culinary Operations among others.

I want you to meet Taylor.

Taylor formerly attended Sickles High School. Like Jenny, Taylor didn't care about school. He wouldn't do his homework, because he thought, "What's the point?" Taylor was getting straight F's. So, what made Taylor think about coming to Bowers-Whitley? It was one of his friends actually. No, it wasn't a friend who was currently a student at Bowers-Whitley. It was one of Taylor's friends who had dropped out of school. Taylor said that his friend would call him in the middle of the day while Taylor was in class. His friend would just be sitting on the couch watching TV. Taylor knew he had to make a change. If he stayed at Sickles, he knew he would end up just like his friend; doing nothing. Taylor knew then he didn't want to do nothing like his friend. He didn't want to be nothing.

Now, everything has changed. Taylor has his mind set on going to college and getting a degree in computer design. Through Bowers-Whitley, Taylor believes in himself because the teachers here believe in him.

“What we do here,” Dr. Colucci says, “is we take at-risk kids and put them on the right track. When I go to local high schools to talk about Bowers-Whitley, I walk around with the principal. I see kids with their heads down on desks, sleeping in class, completely disinterested. These are the kids who just don’t care,” he says, “and that’s exactly who we want.

“I’ll go into a room and talk to these kids. I’ll ask one of them, ‘Hey what do you like to do?’ The typical answer is, ‘Uh, nothing,’ and then I’ll say, ‘Well, what about video games? We have classes at Bowers-Whitley that teach you how to design video games. What would you say if I told you that you could have a career as a video game designer?’ Then, their heads lift up, and their eyes brighten. They’ll say, ‘Wow. Really?’ And I’ll tell them, ‘Yeah. *Really.*’”

I want you to meet Jack.

Jack previously attended Blake High School. It was difficult for Jack to find a ride to school, so he barely attended. When he did attend, he saw kids who would bring guns and knives to school. There were fights everywhere.” Jack lowers his eyes, and his smile fades when he says, “All the time, I heard gunshots in the parking lot.”

Jack received very poor grades while at Blake. His future looked bleak, and he knew it. Then, one day he and his mother were walking around their neighborhood, and they happened to pass Bowers-Whitley.

Jack and his mother both had no idea what it was, but they asked around. Before you knew it, Jack was applying to Bowers-Whitley.

He smiles ear-to-ear when he tells me, “When I was applying, Bowers-Whitley checked my background, and I thought, ‘Oh man, it’s over. They’re never going to let me in.’”

This wasn’t the case.

“The things you do when you’re young,” Jack continues, “follow you wherever you go, but Bowers-Whitley believed in me. Here, they believe in second chances.”

On Jack's first day, he was sitting alone during lunch. A few guys started walking towards him. Jack's initial reaction was, "Oh no. This can't be good." As he braced himself for confrontation, he was sincerely shocked and relieved when they all introduced themselves.

Regarding this friendly introduction, Jack says, "It took one second for people to change everything."

That's how it is here. There aren't any cliques or popular kids or social circles. Everyone is friends with everyone. Everyone is equal.

Dr. Colucci and I weave in and out of classrooms and offices. Everywhere we go, the students' faces ignite with joy when they see their beloved Dr. Colucci. For some reason, I think back to *Happy Feet* and ask Dr. Colucci about it.

"Well, *Happy Feet* is about these penguins who sing," Dr. Colucci beams, "and there is this little penguin who can't sing. Instead, he can dance really, really well, but the other penguins think he is weird. They don't like him because he is different, because he does things differently.

"That's us, here at Bowers-Whitley," he says, smiling this great, big smile. He continues, "We can't sing, but man, we sure can dance."