

Heroes of the month

These special people are making a difference in Rockland County and beyond!

Sophia Kolak and Melissa DeNizard of Strong East Ramapo Students



Gary and Sophia Kolak



Gary and Melissa DeNizard

Lifelong Rockland County resident Sophia Kolak is a founding member of Strong East Ramapo Students, an advocacy group of students from the East Ramapo School District who work to ensure that their educational settings help shape their world to encourage a passion for learning, desire for personal growth, and a commitment to their community. As a student in Grandview and Lime Kiln Elementary Schools, Pomona Middle School, and Ramapo High School, she desired to develop a love of learning, but sensed her own and her classmates' childhood enthusiasm decaying into teenage complacency. Discouragingly, the motivation for most of her fellow star students' hard work shifted from a love of learning to the desire to escape. "It was sad being in a place where so many teachers and students had given up, where so many choices were made about the students, never really by the students," a place where they wouldn't desire to reach high, since "it got to a point where our ceilings were quite literally eroding, and few people could bring them-

selves to care." Ms. Kolak began to question, "Why couldn't we walk into class smiling, excited about learning ... finding intrinsic value in our experience, rather than counting down the days until we graduate, or dropping out, only to feel degraded by the place that was supposed to empower us?" Her friend Melissa Denizard—a Spring Valley High School senior who has lived in New York since the age of two, when her family immigrated from Haiti—agreed, and had some ideas about how to begin solving the problem. When Ms. Denizard reached middle school, the funding for the arts and sports programs had been significantly reduced, but reaching out to fellow dissatisfied and volunteer-minded students encouraged her that she was not alone, and that her voice was important. Their partnership, curiosity and desire for a brighter vision of what public education could and should be—not only for themselves, but also for those to come behind them, such as younger siblings and family friends—led to the founding of Strong East Ramapo Students. These students attend school board meetings and government legislative meetings, hold protests, and educate themselves about greater potential opportunities to suggest and create viable options for themselves. Their efforts led to a state grant to the district of \$3 million, which allowed for the reinstatement of arts, full day kindergarten, and other crucial programs. Ms. Kolak, Ms. Denizard, and their fellow volunteers work to ensure that their education reflects their needs and that the voices of current students are heard by the district that represents them. Ms. Denizard has realized the incredible reach that dedicated volunteer efforts can make: "Our student led movement was much bigger than us; we had built something that restored our community's faith in education." Ms. Kolak, who currently plans to attend St. John's College in Annapolis next year, believes, "if my efforts lead to one more kid discovering that school is not as bad as they thought, then I think I can graduate from Ramapo in June knowing that I've made some sort of an impact"

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