

Complete turnaround

Dickinson junior credits 'fifteen together' program for changes; wins national 'Overcoming Obstacles' award



Journal Photo by Christopher Powers

MARY MAISONET takes notes during her English class at Dickinson High School, Jersey City, where she is a junior.

By Ken Thorbourne
Journal staff writer

Mary Maisonet, now a 16-year-old junior at Dickinson High, barely recognizes the shy, withdrawn person that she used to be.

Just two years ago, the Jersey City native said she was friendless, isolated, the butt of classroom jokes because of her chunky physique and the way she dressed. Maisonet said she wallowed in her handicaps, — cerebral palsy, dyslexia, and high blood pressure. By the end of her freshman year in high school however Maisonet had undergone a metamorphosis.

She is now filled with hope and energy, getting good grades in school and racking up medals for her cooking expertise. She is also an athlete.

Over the past three years Maisonet has competed as a Special Olympics athlete, running in the 4x100 relay and the 100-meter dash. Her favorite event is the standing long jump, she said. She pitches and catches as part of a Special Olympics softball team. In May, her Jersey City Raiders beat the North Bergen Wildcats 16 to 0 to win the state title.

"I was always a good athlete," said Maisonet, "I just didn't know it."

Maisonet has gone from earning C's and D's in school to churning out A's and B's in school. She is president of an high school club that competes

across the state at sewing, cooking, culinary presentation, and fashion design.

What caused the turnaround?

Maisonet credits "fifteen together," a program the high school offers for incoming "at risk" freshmen. These are students who have had trouble in school and are thought to be more likely to drop out. The program links youngsters with a teacher and peer mentor for two years.

The students meet with their teacher-mentor every day during the school year for help with homework or just to talk about life.

The idea behind the program is that if a student can make a connection — with a teacher, a team, a club — they'll want to come to school and will hang in there when the going gets tough.

Maisonet could be the program's Exhibit A.

"I got more self-esteem because I realized that there were teachers and students that cared," said Maisonet, as animated now as she was shy. "The teachers at Dickinson inspired me. 'fifteen together' started it all."

Maisonet's turnaround has caught the attention of Overcoming Obstacles, the national nonprofit responsible for "fifteen together's" curriculum. Maisonet will be the sole student honoree at the organization's annual fundraiser to be held on Oct. 28

at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City.

Matthew Damm, the professional development coordinator for Overcoming Obstacles, culled through 100 nominations for the honor. Within 20 minutes of meeting Maisonet he knew he had met the winner.

"Here was someone with a long list of disabilities — What I connected with was a complete turnaround," said Damm. "She's been so successful."

"Mary was very fortunate," said Dickinson High Principal James Burke. "She found her niche. Ultimately, that's what we want for all our students."

Cooking, Maisonet believes, is her special niche. "I had always cooked with my father," she explained. "We didn't have a great relationship, but when it came to cooking we got along."

In the last two years, Maisonet has won eight medals in statewide cooking events. Asked what she wants to do when she grows up, there's no hesitation: "I want to be on TV, have a restaurant, be a chef."

Asked what she thinks about all the honors coming her way, Maisonet said. "It makes me feel good about myself. I don't have to be famous to be recognized. I just have to work hard in school and it will all pay off."