

# Intro.

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**“What drives me is making sure the kids have access to excellent instruction and empowering teachers to make good choices for the school.”**

**NICHOLAS LEONARDOS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE LOWELL COMMUNITY CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL**

## The Student Mill

100 YEARS LATER, AN ALUM WORKS IN THE SAME BUILDING WHERE HIS GREAT-GRANDMOTHER MADE SHOES

STORY BY LORY HOUGH

After NICHOLAS LEONARDOS, ED.M.'99, was offered the job last summer as executive director of a charter school in Lowell, Massachusetts, one of the first things his family said to him was, “It was meant to be.”

Not only had Leonardos been teaching and leading schools since the early 1990s, but he had a close personal tie to the building where the school was housed: his great-grandmother, Constantina Niarchos, had worked there in a shoe factory 100 years earlier.

“I knew that both of my grandparents were born in Lowell and that my great-grandmother had worked in a mill, but I had no idea which building,” he says. Luckily, one of his relatives did. “My father’s cousin is 92 and grew up in Boston in the South End,” he says. “He now lives in Boulder, Colorado, but we visit in the summer and through the magic of Facebook, we stay connected. After I took this job, he sent me a Facebook message saying he remembered her working in Mill 5. The Lowell Community Charter Public School is in Mill 5 and 6. It’s pretty amazing.”

Although Constantina died before Leonardos was born, he remembers hearing about her, mostly from his grandmother Evangeline (Constantina’s daughter). He learned that she had been a mill worker, most likely at the Appleton Manufacturing Company, working on the part of the shoe that becomes the tongue. He also learned that by 1940, Constantina was living with Evangeline and her family, includ-

ing Leonardos' father, Gregory, in Cambridge, where Evangeline's husband (also Nicholas) owned a bar.

During a visit to his office at the charter school, in a renovated space with high ceilings that has kept the integrity of the mill, Leonardos pulls out Constantina's passport, which he discovered in his father's home after he passed away a little more than a year ago. Handwritten in tiny script, the passport is hard to make out, but some details are legible: Born in 1878, Constantina emigrated from Greece to Lowell to work. At the time, Lowell was one of the country's largest textile centers. Constantina likely moved to the city, about 30 miles north of Boston, during a second wave of immigrants that included workers from Poland, Portugal, and her country.

It's a story that many of his 815 students in the K–8 school can relate to: 97 percent are minority and 49 percent are English language learners. During class visits, about three-quarter of the hands routinely go up when he asks students how many have family members from other countries.

That's why during those visits he openly shares his own background, including the fact that his dad only spoke Greek until he started kindergarten, that his grandparents were born in Lowell, and that his great-grandmother worked in the same building.

"Every teacher on their door has an 'all about me' page listing things they like to do, pets, that sort of thing," he says. He has one, too, showing pictures of his family and Greece. It includes a photo of Constantina. "It's a great connection, the fact that this building was a mill employing mostly women. Now it's a school with girls, boys too. When I visit classrooms, I bring my great-grandmother's passport. I talk about Lowell being a gateway city" — a place immigrants flock to for work and to start a new life.

It certainly was a gateway for Constantina, who helped add to the growth of Lowell, just as Leonardos is adding to the growth of his charter school.

"What drives me is making sure the kids have access to excellent instruction," he says, "and empowering teachers to make good choices for the school." It seems to be working. After some bumpy years, the school is now level 1, the highest designation a school can get from the state. "The fact that it's on a pretty good track now is a source of pride about the school's history and where we're at," he says. "It's exciting."

WISE WORDS

**"Our supply is about 20 percent of those who even have access."**

Professor and Academic Dean **Nonie Lesaux** discussing the imbalance between families wanting high-quality preschools and what's available. (NECN)



**A**NGELA HENRY, ED.M.'83, was destined to do something big with her voice. Growing up, people told her they loved hearing her read out loud. Her parents even relied on it: As the family camped its way across the United States, Henry would read to her siblings to pass the time. She says that J.R.R. Tolkien novels may have prevented fratricide in the back seat. Now a voice and screen actor, Henry talked to *Ed.* about her career, Harvard, and off-key jingles.

**How did you get started with voice work?**

My start was in third grade. You know how the teacher has each student read a sentence aloud from the book of the week? My teacher would let me read paragraphs. My seventh-grade English teacher told me that she could listen to me read the phone book.

**As a kid, you were fascinated by ads and commercials. Did any stand out?**

The Oscar Mayer Bologna commercial was one of my favorites. I loved the song, the kids, and the way they ended the jingle

just a little off-key. I was a child musician and knew how hard it was to do that deliberately.

**What was your first gig?**

Reading law text into a tape recorder for two blind law students was my first paid gig. It helped pay my college tuition. They told me I was the only reader who didn't put them to sleep.

**What was the funniest thing you've ever narrated?**

There's a character in *The Other Side of Everything* who is self-centered, self-promoting, unashamedly bombastic, and the author often has him speaking with nonstop alliteration. It was hilarious. I had to do multiple takes before I could record without bursting out laughing.

**Your first audiobook was Condoleezza Rice's *Democracy: The Long Road To Freedom*. How did that happen?**

The producer at Hachette Audio asked a friend, who is a casting director, if she had any actors in her stable who could narrate well. What I do is voice acting, not just reading. A lot of great actors can