



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Shelley B. Mayer

## Lohud: Westchester, Rockland nonprofits team up to polish job skills for people with disabilities

NANCY CUTLER July 30, 2023

WEST NYACK – A new venture at the Palisades Center is a study in collaboration.

[Girl AGain](#), a White Plains-based American Girl resale shop, now has stock and staff at the [Independence Cafe – A Unique Boutique](#) a store in the Palisades Center.

Both retail outlets are extensions of nonprofits with similar missions:

- Independence Cafe is operated by [BRIDGES](#), a Rockland nonprofit dedicated to advocacy and leadership on behalf of people with disabilities, veterans, and people formerly involved in the justice system. The shop offers wares created by people with disabilities and other challenges.
- Girl AGain is a subsidiary of [Yes She Can](#), a Westchester-based nonprofit organization that teaches and develops job skills for young women with autism. The program refurbishes used American Girl dolls, clothing, furniture, accessories, and books and offers them for sale.

Both of the retail programs provide training in product development, marketing, retail and more.



"It's about partnership," said BRIDGES CEO Carlos Martinez. "We do more together than we do apart."

Even the way the two organizations connected was an exercise in nonprofit collaboration.

Randi Rios-Castro, CEO of [Jawonio](#), which provides lifespan services for people with disabilities in the Hudson Valley, connected the leaders of the two at an event sponsored by Volunteer NY!, which sets people up with volunteer opportunities.

"We knew there was a great connection between what they're doing and what we're doing," said Yes She Can, Inc.'s Executive Director Robin Davies-Small.

Maki Tezuka works as an administrative assistant with Girl AGain in Westchester. She said the practical training has helped her develop job skills and confidence.

## **'Totally adorable'**

The dolls and accessories are now on the shelves of The Independence Cafe. Officials from Rockland and Westchester were in the small crowd Tuesday morning after a celebratory ribbon-cutting.

"We are just the beneficiaries of a great partnership," said state Sen. Shelley Mayer, chair of the Senate Education Committee. Besides, the Yonkers Democrat said it was a chance to pick up a new doll for her granddaughter.



Assemblyman Chris Burdick, whose 93rd Assembly District includes the original GirlAGain store, serves on the Assembly's Committee on People with Disabilities. Noting that more than 70% of people with disabilities are unemployed, Burdick says programs like BRIDGES and Yes She Can are "recognizing abilities of people with disabilities."

Clarkstown Supervisor George Hoehmann, who ran the Rockland Independent Living Center for years, said the collaborative program "is doing exactly what we need it to do for people with different abilities."

Cheryl Baum of the Rockland Economic Development, Tourism and Film, lauded the endeavor at Tuesday's opening. She pointed to the skill-building components and the

collaborative spirit. "Not to mention," she added, "it's totally adorable."



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