Summerbridge influenced my life before I even knew it existed. Summerbridge came to me in the form of 1980 graduate Joel Vargas—one of my very best friends for more than 30 years now. As our friendship grew back in the early 1980s (each of us rocking an era-appropriate terrible haircut: his Freddie Prinz vs. my Barry Gibb), I saw how his experiences as both a Summerbridge student and teacher shaped him into the person for whom I had so much affection and respect.

Thanks to Joel, I went on to teach at Summerbridge as a college student in 1987 and 1988. My experiences over those two summers led me to change my college path and earn a teaching credential, along with my BA. I fully expected to spend many years as a New York City public school teacher, but Lois Loofbourrow and Tom Malarkey lured me back to Summerbridge in 1990.

I learned the administrative side of Summerbridge from Lois and Tom, and had the great honor to run the program with Tania Altamirano for four amazing years. These were also the heady years when Summerbridge started sharing and adapting the model of students teaching students across the nation (and internationally). As a young program director, just as a college-age teacher, I was awed by the caliber of people who came together to make Summerbridge happen—from age 11 on up (I won’t say how far up, Lois...). I was amazed at their and my capacity to work, to imagine, to innovate, and to care. My heart grew at Summerbridge.

Finally, I realized what every parent knows: that if you care about someone, you want to do more than teach, support, encourage, and love them. You also feel the need to protect and fight for them. In my case, that fight led me to what has been so far a nearly two-decade career in law enforcement. While my work has changed, I still believe the most important lessons and best parts of who I am came from Summerbridge. And Joel Vargas still has funny hair.