

Find out why Laura Zottarelli from Lodi applied to Bergen Community College as an NJ STARS student, and how her decision changed her life! Laura is currently starring in an NJ STARS commercial on Verizon FIOS, Channel 26! To view the commercial, and an infomercial starring six other NJ STARS students and graduates talking about their experiences at BCC, go to [www.bergen.edu/njstars](http://www.bergen.edu/njstars) and select News & Social Media, or go to Facebook at [www.facebook.com/bccnjstars](http://www.facebook.com/bccnjstars), and select Videos.



LAURA ZOTTARELLI

# finding my path

LODI TEEN APPRECIATES HER COLLEGE JOURNEY

**G**rowing up, I had, and still have, a troubled home life. Both of my brothers struggle with addiction. It is, unfortunately, my reality. I wake up and go to school every day knowing that at any moment I could be getting a phone call that will change my life.

Not only does it affect my household, but also my community. When I started high school, a teacher said, "You're Michael's sister?" I said, "Yes," and she shook her head as if she was disappointed in me. Their mistakes and reputation carried onto my own.

Despite my situation being a challenge, it is the reason why I am so determined to achieve my dreams and succeed.

I want to build a name for myself – my own name – so that people do not judge me based off the decisions of my brothers. Instead, I am striving for respect – for people to value

me for my accomplishments and my contributions to my community.

Where did I plan to start my journey? Well, that is a story on its own.

Bergen Community College was not my first choice coming out of high school. I originally wanted to attend a four-year institution, specifically Monmouth University, but it did not work out due to financial reasons. But, because I graduated in the top 15 percent of my high school class, I was fortunate to qualify for the NJ Stars program. If it were not for this program, out-of-pocket costs would be unaffordable. I would probably have to look at other options for my education, such as a trade school. This was an extremely rough transition for me because all of my friends went away to college and I was still home where I did not want to be. For a while, I was miserable.

Arriving at Bergen, I knew I wanted to make the best of my two years, regardless of my feelings. I was always active in organizations and events in high school, so the Student Government Association (SGA) was definitely my first option at Bergen. When I applied for a senator position, the application required me to obtain signatures from various people around the college. Juhi Bhatt, a student services professional, said after I explained my situation, "I see it as Monmouth's loss was Bergen's gain." It was a breath

of fresh air to come into a new school where I did not want to be and still feel that same level of comfort I received when I was in Lodi High School.

Moving forward, I received the senator position and later became chairwoman of Bergen Community College at the Meadowlands SGA. SGA changed my entire outlook on Bergen. I grew to love Bergen so much that I decided to run for president of SGA... and I won.

The principles I learned, and continue to learn here, are what I wished I had learned sooner. I have met my best friends and some of the most impactful people in my life. Student services professional Greg Fenkart and professor Mecheline Farhat turned into life mentors who mean everything to me because I did not have that guidance when I first came into college. Everyone at Bergen was so willing to offer his or her assistance. They are most importantly, relatable.

After I graduate, I want to take what I have learned from this experience and use it in the future to help me achieve my personal dreams – and in my community. Although it was not what I wanted at the time, in retrospect, attending Bergen has definitely been one of the best decisions I could have ever made in my life.

I do not regret one minute spent at this institution. 🍷

– LAURA ZOTTARELLI

PRESIDENT, STUDENT  
GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION  
BERGEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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