MEDFORD HIGH SCHOOL

Local student group receives hands-on learning in the Fells

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Thanks to a new community partnership with Medford High School, a group of students recently took their education out of the classroom, over the river and through the woods.

The E.A.G.L.E. (Earth Advocates Green Leaders for the Environment) Club was formed this spring at MHS, allowing students to go into the Middlesex Fells as part of their regular and after-school curriculum.

In December, community partners including the Friends of the Fells, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Environmental Protection Agency and the USDA Forest Service began meeting at the school with Headmaster Dr. John Perella and physical education teacher Matt Galusi to discuss ways to engage students and staff in exploration of the nearby Fells area.

The enrichment program is part of a larger collaborative facilitated by the Somerville-based nonprofit Eagle Eye Institute, which seeks to connect youths in the area with the natural environment.

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Medford High School senior Kin Chau works on the bog bridge behind the school while Eagle Eye Institute intern Jose Sanchez helps junior Alyssa Valentyn.
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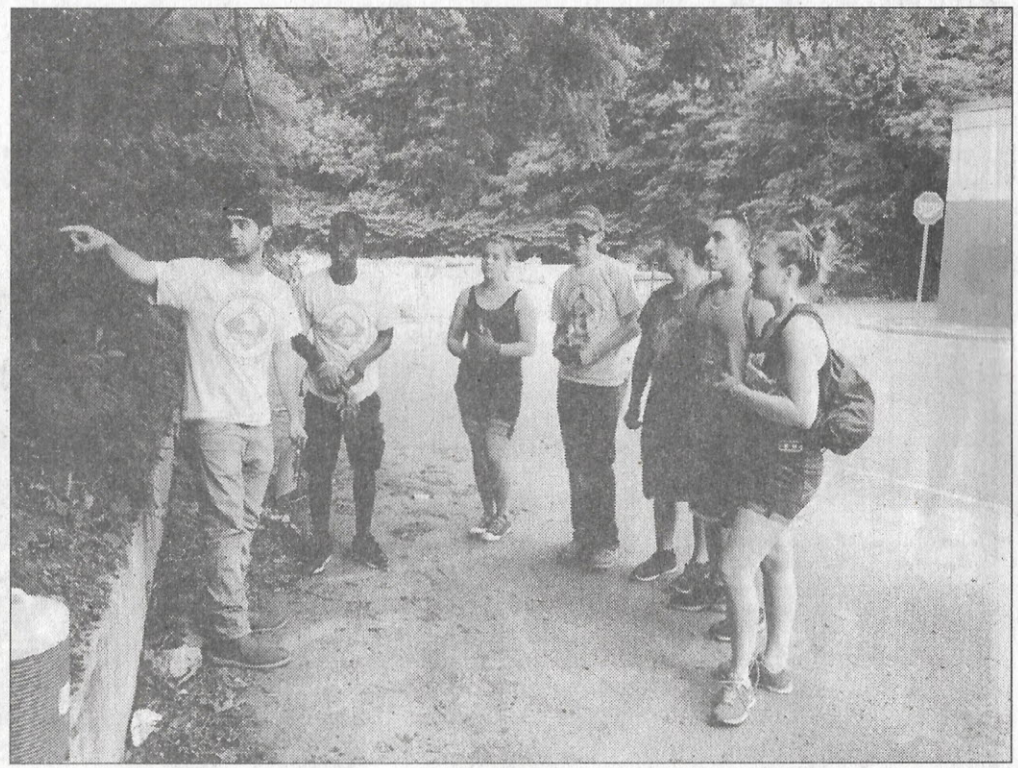

Above left, Eagle Eye Institute intern Jose Sanchez, left, Medford High School junior Alyssa Valentyn and MHS senior Kin Chau stand on their recent bog bridge project. Above right, Sanchez, left, directs students in the Eagle Eye program. COURTESY PHOTOS / EAGLE EYE INSTITUTE, SUSAN EKSTROM

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E.A.G.L.E. program manager Susan Ekstrom said the collaboration was a big success.

"It was clear that the students got a lot out of it and Headmaster Perella was on board with it from the start," Ekstrom said. "We really do see the importance of getting students out of the classroom and into the Fells, where there is a great opportunity for them to apply what they have learned."

The Lawrence Woods section of the Fells abuts the high school, but as Ekstrom points out, is underutilized by students. Through the Eagle Eye partnership, students were taught about the ecology and challenges facing the Fells, while developing trail maintenance, outdoor leadership and teamwork skills through E.A.G.L.E. Club sessions during weekly gym classes.

Perella, who said the program was a very exciting opportunity for Medford High School, is still a work in progress.

"We spent a lot of time just talking and now it is time to reassess and see what works and what doesn't," Perella said. "Everyone knows that the best kind of learning is hands-on learning, and we hope this type of program becomes the norm moving forward. It can be quite groundbreaking."

After eight weeks of direct learning and unstructured time in the Fells, students took part in stewardship projects aimed at improving public access and maintaining the Fells' integrity.

As part of their hands-on work earlier this month, students first installed two water bars and steps on the steep section of trails near the school, and later installed a bog bridge on the Fells trail behind the school athletic fields.

"Engaging a core group of students in outdoor lessons and activities, specifically tailored to their local woods, will give them the experience, knowledge and inspiration to spend more time in nature," Ekstrom said. "Participating in a long-term stewardship project will grow respect, appreciation and engagement in the Fells as youth will want to show their friends and family all their hard work."

The Community Conservation Education Partnership (CCEP) between the high school, Eagle Eye and its community partners used both in-school and after-school outdoor education, field research and enrichment activities.

As part of their vision statement, the CCEP seeks to reduce nature deficit, beautify the school and increase appreciation, career opportunities, respect and stewardship of nature. Moving beyond the annual Earth Day events, the partnership aims to make hands-on outdoor education an integral part of the DNA of Medford High for years to come.

"We plan to continue offering environmental programming during the school day, both this fall working in MHS gym classes and several English classes as well," Ekstrom said. "We will also continue to facilitate monthly meetings with the CCEP — with the goal of connecting the entire Medford High School community to the Middlesex Fells Reservation."

Perella said the overwhelming support from the community partners made the program all the more effective.

"Everyone seems to realize how this type of program hits many needs for the students," he said. "It helps them academically and socially, it gets them physically active, and it opens the door for many different types of learning that are not necessarily possible in a classroom setting."

— For more information on the Eagle Eye Institute, visit eagleeyei.org.