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VALLEY COLLABORATIVE

Volume 12, Issue 1 News for the extended Valley Collaborative community Fall 2023

Welcome Back



FROM LEFT: VALLEY COLLABORATIVE DIRECTOR OF HR, TITLE IX AND 504 COORDINATOR KARI MORRIN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DR. CHRIS A. SCOTT, AND DEPUTY DIRECTOR JOIA MERCURIO,

Dear Valley Community:

Fall is in the air! I hope you had a wonderful summertime. Valley's summer school students enjoyed several engaging field trips and enrichment opportunities throughout our six-week program while the individuals in our adult programs continued to hone their vocational skills at businesses throughout the Merrimack Valley. We were eager to welcome our students, DDS/MRC adult program participants, and staff back to our state-of-the-art facilities, which are equipped with the latest technology, curriculum, and furnishings for the beginning of fall.

Valley's staff enjoyed an inspiring Orientation Day on September 5, 2023. We welcomed Dr. Donna Hicks, author of *Leading with Dignity*, who provided the keynote address. Dr. Hicks' Ten Essential

Elements of Leading with Dignity offers the framework for Valley's "Leadership at Every Level" professional learning series. These elements represent the values at the heart of Valley's culture. All Ten Essential Elements are at the core of our work to ensure Valley continues to be a diverse, equitable, and inclusive (DEI) organization where all students and staff feel like they belong. Maintaining a culture where all people feel they belong is hard work and among the most important work we do.

We also welcomed back Dr. Anthony Bent, Facilitator for Valley's "Leadership at Every Level" professional learning series as a guest speaker on Orientation Day. For the second year in a row, Dr. Bent is leading a book study with our leadership teams anchored by Dr. Hicks' foundational text *Leading with Dignity*. Additionally, all of Valley's staff are reading and studying Dr. Hicks' book with their programmatic teams.

I want to re-share with you Dr. Donna Hicks' *Ten Essential Elements of Dignity* (Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 2018) below, as these elements are the fundamental drivers that shape our culture:

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Valley Elementary: a Fun-Filled Fall Ahead

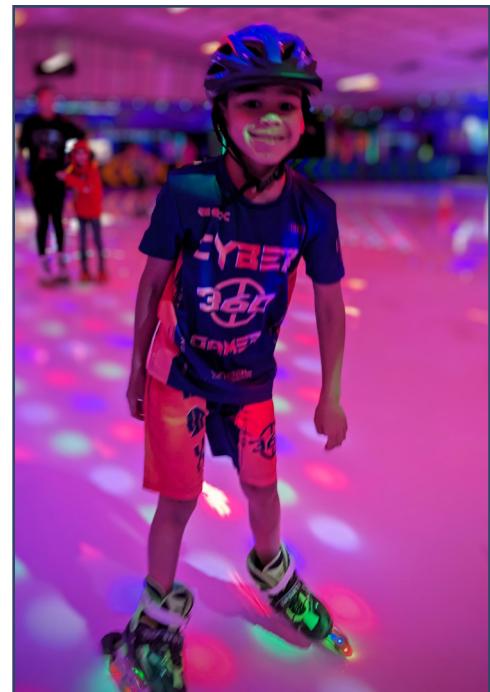
Valley Elementary School is excited to kick off a new school year after a great summer program! Some highlights of the summer included a BMX show, an animal show by Curious Creatures, STEM workshops by the Acton Discovery Center, African drumming workshops by Ammaya Dance and Drum, and an inspirational skateboard show. Our students also got out and about, enjoying a day on skates at Roller Kingdom. We also took lots of field and community trips to area parks, hiking trails, museums, beaches and zoos.

The new school year is already off to an action-packed start. Detective Bethany Bonczar, of the Tyngsboro Police Department, came to our school on 9/15 with her comfort dog, George, to read her new book, *Curious About George*, to students. Bethany wrote the book over the past year in collaboration with Tayla Makevich, a special education teacher in the Tyngsborough Public Schools who created original illustrations for the book.

We've also got lots of fun fall activities planned. In October, we will continue our fall tradition when classes will go to Parlee Farms in Tyngsboro to pick pumpkins, take a hay-ride and enjoy apple cider and donuts. October 3rd will be school picture day, and we are looking forward to a visit from a traveling barber to give students fresh haircuts so that they are camera ready! We are looking forward to welcoming families into the school for an open house on 9/26 and later in November for our annual family Thanksgiving event. ■



TOP LEFT: AMELIA OLIVERA AT THE PETTING ZOO AT PARLEE FARMS; BOTTOM LEFT: HENRY GOLD PRACTICES AFRICAN DRUMMING; BOTTOM RIGHT: KEESHAWE WINNEERT AT ROLLER KINGDOM; TOP RIGHT: JAMESON OSTERFIELD WITH GEORGE THE COMFORT DOG.



Students in Valley Middle and Transitional High School Programs Ready to Make a Splash

Swimming is about to return to Valley Middle and High School Transitional Programs. Often a favorite student activity, swimming was put on hold during the pandemic. Now, thanks to the enthusiasm of students, and the persistence of staff who've been searching for an appropriate pool, the swimming program will soon be back.

Physical therapist Katie Nutile says that excitement has been building about a return to the pool. "Some kids recall swimming in the past and are eager to get back to it. Others have just heard about it and are eager to give it a try," says Katie.

Once the program is up and running, ten to twelve students, joined by Valley staff, will head to the pool. The goal is to enable students to swim once a month, says Katie, who has worked at Valley for the past nine and a half years. While the students may think of swimming as another fun Valley activity, Katie is focused on the many benefits that swimming can bring.

Start with getting into the water. While typical pools can be downright chilly, a therapy pool is warmer and offers a ramp for ease of entry. Even students in wheelchairs can go right in, says Katie, who points out that once in the water, students of all abilities benefit tremendously from the buoyancy.

Because buoyancy reduces body weight by 80%, the pool provides a perfect environment for restriction free (or at least restriction-less) movement. At the same time that students are enjoying the warm water, they're also building muscle tone thanks to water resistance, as well as improving balance and coordination, and developing motor skills. Finally, swimming provides



WISDOM M ENJOYS SOME POOL TIME WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION ASSISTANT ELIS RAMOS. THE SWIMMING PROGRAM, ON HOLD SINCE THE PANDEMIC, IS RESTARTING.

an important safety skill for a population that is at higher risk of drowning. All of those reasons have made bringing swimming back to Valley a priority for school staff and leaders.

"Swimming has been a therapeutic experience for our students and they love it!" says Principal Nicole Noska. "It has been a wonderfully accessible and rewarding activity for our students. In addition to strengthening muscles, improving flexibility and posture, we've seen students gain confidence and independence."

Research confirms the connection between gaining skills in the pool and a corresponding increase in self confidence and self esteem. That's because as students learn new skills, they're also discovering new abilities and expanding their horizons.

When asked why they want to take the plunge, Valley students of-

fer a variety of reasons. "It's a good thing, and it will give me exercise," says Stephanie Delmonico. "I want to swim at school. It will make me feel good. I would love to go in a big pool or hot tub," says Christopher Cote.

Katie, who was a college swim coach, says that she's as eager to get back to the pool as her students. "There are just so many benefits to getting in the water, and the students have a great time. That's a great combination."

While finding an appropriate pool has been tough due to a persistent shortage of lifeguards, staff are hopeful that one will be located soon. Lots of aspiring Valley swimmers hope so too! ■

Democracy in Action at Valley Transitional High School Alternative Programs

The ballots have been counted and the results are official: Valley Transitional High School Alternative Programs has a new student council. Featuring six representatives, two from each of the school site, the new governing body will give students a platform to advocate for the needs of their classmates while providing them with essential training in leadership skills.

Principal Nick LeClair says that the decision to start a student council reflected input from students at the end of the last school year. “What we were hearing was that students felt that their teachers listened to them in the moment but that it was hard to make actual change, and that this was causing them to feel frustrated,” says Nick. A student governing body is also a way of providing students with a whole range of skills, including organizing and having conversations with adult decision makers. Add to the mix the fact that several Valley staff had served as student leaders during their high school years and the case for a student council was clear.

Tamara Melnick, an English and theater teacher at the Alternative High School vocational site, was class president for several years at her alma mater, Lawrence High School. She says that recalling her own experience speaking up for her peers so that they could communicate their ideas—for events, field trips, or for things they wanted to see changed—convinced her that a similar structure could be beneficial for Valley students. “The students from our different sites come up with great ideas but they don’t always go anywhere,” says Tamara. “Now we can start to translate those ideas into practice and programming.”

For the students who campaigned



ENGLISH TEACHER TAMARA MELNICK SERVED ON STUDENT COUNCIL WHEN SHE WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL AND HELPED PUSH FOR THE NEW GOVERNING BODY AT VALLEY.

for seats on the new council, having to make a case for their own election among their peers was a learning experience in and of itself. Eleventh grader Eden Hogan was one of them. Eden says that she developed a taste for advocacy after she and other students successfully lobbied for a pet turtle to join the Valley community, then made sure that the reptile had appropriate living quarters. Running for office meant convincing enough students that she was the right person to speak up for them. While other candidates put up fliers, Eden relied on word of mouth. “They know me and trust me to speak up,” says Eden.

On election day, Eden’s reputation as an advocate paid off. Her peers voted her and two other students onto the council. They’ll join three additional students, representing each school site, who’ve been appointed.

The council has already held its first meeting. On the agenda: fund-raising for the senior class. The funds might go to subsidize a class trip or to make a donation in the name of

the class of 2024. The ultimate decision, though, will be in the hands of students as represented by the new student council. And that’s exactly the point.

“Our students are so creative and they have the ability to use that creativity for good,” says Tamara. She recalls that when she served as class president, she tried to encourage her classmates to use their energy and power for good purposes. “I try to do the same thing here at Valley,” says Tamara.

Nick hopes that the experience in democracy is something that will prepare Valley students for the future. “They’re going to be learning so many great skills, including how to get a message out and how to use facts and data in their advocacy.” All of these can go on a resume, says Nick, but that’s only the beginning. “Who knows where these skills could take them?” ■

Adult Services: Giving Back Brings Rewards

Valley's Adult programming has long highlighted volunteer opportunities in the community. The individuals clearly value the chance to give back to other people who may be in a less fortunate situation, and one distinct arena we volunteer in is making sure people in the community have access to food. Valley has been partnering with Meals on Wheels out of Chelmsford for the last four years, and more recently we've started helping with Meals on Wheels in Tewksbury as well. Additionally, the Valley Adult Program partners with The Merrimack Valley Food Bank out of Lowell and with "People helping people," or as it is more commonly known, the Burlington Food Pantry.

Volunteering is such an essential part of Valley's Adult Programming as it helps the individuals we serve realize the benefit of donating their time to a cause greater than any one person. In these settings the individuals get to witness, and become part of, a community coming together to support people who need help the most.

So many of the individuals served by Valley have benefited from the kindness and philanthropy of others. In our daily lessons we often discuss what it means to be a productive member of society and why it is so important to contribute within our communities. This message and understanding are a driving force of the Adult program as individuals are consistently less concerned about any money they earn through their paid employment opportunities, and more about how they can be involved in chances to help the people around them, regardless of the situation.

Ben Morrisson often works as the coach, overseeing the volunteer efforts, in partnership with the Chelmsford Senior Center. He says that Valley's indi-



INDIVIDUALS VOLUNTEERING AT THE BURLINGTON FOOD PANTRY. FROM LEFT: ERIC HORAN, ALANA CONNELL, LISA DEMEO, JULIE ANDERSON AND ADAM GUILD.

viduals look forward to greeting and helping out the seniors on the route, and commends the Chelmsford Senior Center for being such a great partner. "Not only do they provide a great base for our volunteer work, they also provide a setting where our individuals feel safe and comfortable, both in who they are and what they can offer the greater community," says Ben.

With Meals on Wheels, the Food Bank, and Food Pantry, our individuals are helping to provide people with something essential to survival. In Meals on Wheels, the individuals deliver prepared meals directly to people in their homes. The appreciation shown to our individuals from the clients receiving their meals is unmatched, and it helps to reinforce how important the service is that the individuals get to be a part of. Our volunteer work with the Food Pantry differs a bit as we are actually stationed in a warehouse and the individuals are helping to sort and package meals that will provide sup-

port to community members who are in need.

Alana Connell says that she particularly enjoys working with the Burlington Food Pantry. "I like thinking about when the people get the donations and how it will make them feel, how it will help them, and how it can make things in their life easier for them," says Alana. "I also like that they have baby supplies, pet supplies, and hygiene supplies because people need all those things as well."

We often talk to prospective new members of Adult programming about the culture and community that are built through being a part of Valley. These truths are never more on display than they are when our individuals get the opportunity to volunteer their time and improve the lives of their fellow community members. ■

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Acknowledgment

Give people your full attention by listening, hearing, validating and responding to their concerns and what they have been through.

Inclusion

Make others feel that they belong at all levels of relationship (family, community, organization, nation).

Safety

Put people at ease at two levels: physically, where they feel free of bodily harm; and psychologically, where they feel free of concern about being shamed or humiliated, that they feel free to speak without fear of retribution.

Fairness

Treat people justly, with equality, and in an evenhanded way, according to agreed upon laws and rules.

Independence

Empower people to act on their own behalf so that they feel in control of their lives and experience a sense of hope and possibility.

Welcome Back

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Acceptance of Identity

Approach people as neither inferior nor superior to you; give others the freedom to express their authentic selves without fear of being negatively judged; interact without prejudice or bias, accepting how race, religion, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, disability, etc. are at the core of their identities. Assume they have integrity.

Recognition

Validate others for their talents, hard work, thoughtfulness, and help; be generous with praise; give credit to others for their contributions, ideas and experience.

Valley Collaborative Board

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Interim Superintendent, Billerica Public Schools

Mr. Steven Stone

Superintendent, Dracut Public Schools

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Ms. Brenda Theriault-Regan

Superintendent, Tewksbury Public Schools

Dr. Michael Flanagan

Superintendent, Tyngsborough Public Schools

Dr. Christopher Chew

Superintendent, Westford Public Schools

Understanding

Believe that what others think matters; give them the chance to explain their perspectives, express their points of view; actively listen in order to understand them.

Benefit of the Doubt

Treat people as trustworthy; start with the premise that others have good motives and are acting with integrity.

Accountability

Take responsibility for your actions; if you have violated the dignity of another, apologize; make a commitment to change hurtful behaviors.

Please reach out at any time; my door is always open.

My best to you always,

Chris A. Scott, Ph. D.
Executive Director