
Vinalhaven program creates safe, creative learning environment

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(Photo by: Morgan Kirkham) Vinalhaven students silk screened these bags as part of The Arc's first anniversary celebration.

Vinalhaven — When Tristan Jackson was in college it occurred to him that there had been something missing from his home school education.

Jackson grew up on Greens Island, a 400-acre island to the west of Carvers Harbor on Vinalhaven. He was home schooled before attending Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., where he majored in psychology and sociology.

Jackson said in an interview Dec. 23 that those missing components were rigor, regular and objective assessments, and ongoing feedback. He said he also discovered that public education was lacking in student-centered, curiosity driven opportunities for learning.

"The basic philosophy that I go by is 'teach the student, not the subject,'" he said. "Home schooling really let me pursue my own interests and get my hands on projects and see things take shape in the physical world rather than just on a chalkboard."

While at college, Jackson decided he wanted to work in alternative education and "come up with a solution somewhere between those two extremes," he said. When he graduated in 2005 he applied for work at the Vinalhaven School. He began teaching at the island's public school in September 2006, doing what he referred to as hands-on alternative education for at risk students.

His position was a combination of a traditional vocational-technical program supported by the Mid-Coast School of Technology and a new alternative education model.

"By the fall of 2007 I was teaching the class and was also the CoSEED coordinator," he said.

CoSEED, or Community-based School Environmental Education, is described on the Web site at antiochne.edu as a "three-year collaboration with particular schools and their communities to work together to develop place-based learning. By using the local natural and cultural environment as the setting for learning -- and involving students in addressing community needs through hands-on service -- CoSEED projects seek to connect students, schools, curriculum and community."

When Jackson became coordinator, the Vinalhaven school was in the third and final year of the Antioch University of New England program.

"I entered with a group of middle school students who were looking for service learning opportunities in town," he said. "Community service is volunteering for the good of the community. Hands-on learning is for the good of the student. Service learning meets both needs."

He said the service learning project the students wanted to execute was to build a skateboard park. While the group was researching possible locations for an outdoor park, Annie and Perry Boyden approached Jackson and said they had a building they might have to sell. They asked if the young people might want to bring the building back to life.

The building the Boydens offered stands at 39 High St. The couple had purchased it in 1980 and, with other local volunteers, opened it as a nonprofit community center in 1981.

"It had a heyday of activities back then, with events like movie nights, dances and community theater," Jackson said. "However, the founders' board didn't have a plan to bring in new membership. As people grew up, moved away and died it dwindled down to just the Boydens."

"They were really a driving force behind it and stuck with it," he said.

By 2007, the Boydens were the only people directly involved with the community center building. They kept the lights on and paid the bills, but the building was closed for nine months out of the year.

"They were afraid they would have to sell," Jackson said. "They weren't meeting fundraising goals and they asked me in September of 2007 if I might be able to help them rejuvenate the organization."

Meanwhile, what had been the CoSEED program had morphed into a group called Active Community Centers for Exercise and Safe Socializing, or ACCESS. Jackson said he urged the students to think bigger than just the skate park.

"The emphasis was safety," he said. "There was no place for them to be that was supervised."

The group got a mailing list from the Vinalhaven Chamber of Commerce and sent about 2,000 letters to recipients all over the country. By December 2007 they had raised about \$8,000.

"We knew we had enough to keep the building open throughout the winter," Jackson said. That hadn't happened for years, he said. By the end of that first winter, the group had built an indoor skateboard halfpipe in the part of the building now known as the Vinalhaven Youth Zone. That space, known around town as the VYZ, also houses basketball hoops, a ping-pong table, weights and an LCD projector.

A year ago the Vinalhaven Arts and Recreation Center, known as The ARC, opened an Internet café.

"It's a nonprofit but it also conducts business to create a cash flow as part of a mixed income strategy," Jackson said. "A social enterprise like The ARC generates income through program-related activity. One program is a hands-on training center which we call the ARCAFé."

Eliza Drury is 15 years old and a member of the ACCESS team. In addition she serves on the ARC board and is a student staff member.

"The ARC kind of came out of the need for something for kids to do," she said. "The idea of a teen center had been tossed around to keep kids from getting into things they shouldn't get into."

Students learn by managing and staffing the cafe, which sells espresso drinks, coffee and baked goods. They learn how to maintain a welcoming atmosphere at the only place in town where residents of all ages can sit and enjoy a hot beverage and conversation on a cold winter day. And they learn how to calculate their own payroll and taxes, send letters of thanks to donors, keep track of inventory, and make calls to suppliers.

"Essentially, they learn how to run a service business," Jackson said.

"There are students that don't learn in a so-called normal environment," Drury said. "In Vinalhaven there's a lot of focus on athletics. For the students that didn't do that, there wasn't much to do."

Drury said there was some resistance at first from students who didn't want to be part of something organized by adults.

"But the adults here are popular," she said. "Tristan isn't too much older than us and you can connect with him. It's not as big of an issue anymore."

The cafe offers full service from 7 to 10 a.m. and sees about a dozen regular customers in the morning hours. Jackson said many of these are lobstermen and carpenters who come to the ARCAfe to warm up and socialize.

From September to June the cafe offers self-service until 2:30 p.m. Students return in the afternoon to staff the full service café until 5 p.m. The Internet café has three computers available and offers wireless Internet 24 hours a day along with free printing and fax service.

"In the summer it's a general mishmash," Jackson said. Currently three students work regular shifts. There are a total of eight positions in the ARC, depending on the season, he said.

On Dec. 13 the ARCAfe celebrated the completion of its first year of operation by being open to the public all day. The night before there was a sleepover pizza party where the students silk screened canvas bags with the ARCAfe logo. Those bags were to be sent to special donors as holiday thank-you gifts.

While the group sought large grants at the beginning, Jackson said much of its funding has come from summer residents who have close ties to the island. It also received some small grant funding from the Maine Community Foundation. He said the goal of the organization is to see most of its funding come from activities that take place at the center.

"Since we started in 2007 the kids have raised \$95,000 from private donations," he said. Another \$3,000 came from grants, and in its first year the café earned about \$30,000. Jackson said that income almost supports the training program.

"The idea is to make it self-supporting," he said. "This was a hard year to get it started."

He said the group has a buy-local policy that calls for the purchase of supplies on the island as long as they cost no more than 125 percent of the mainland cost. The group spent about \$20,000 to build the café.

One thing that was purchased off-island was the coffee-making equipment. That, and a great deal of advice and help, came from Alan Spear and Mary Allen of Coffee by Design in Portland.

"They are wonderful people and just great to work with," Jackson said. The beans for the cafe's brews still come from Coffee by Design.

Jackson said the recreation center has spent about \$10,000 on upgrades to the building and utilities cost about \$7,000 every year. His own position hadn't cost the ARC anything until this fall, since it was originally supported by Americorps and the Island Institute through the Island Apprentices program, which is similar to the Island Fellows program but designed to employ local residents.

"This year we have an Americorps grant to support my position, but the hosting site has to pay \$9,500," Jackson said. Café Manager Jessi Wootton, Assistant Trainer Amy Smith and student employees earn a modest payroll, he said, with all salaries adding up to about \$40,000 for the past two years.

Jackson said The ARC has about \$15,000 in the bank to cover sewer, water and heating costs.

"It's barely going to see us through the winter," he said.

In addition to keeping the building warm and open, the funds go to support programs such as martial arts for elementary school students and adults two days a week, basketball coaching after school, and one-on-one tutoring for struggling students.

Student dances take place in the building four to six times a year and Jackson said about half of those enrolled at Vinalhaven High School attend.

The ARC also runs facilitation training workshops for ACCESS team members and trains students in Web site development and graphic design. Generally, staffing for the educational programs is done by volunteers. Members of the paid staff coordinate the programs and organize the calendar.

In January, Drury said, the ARC will host a concert by local favorite the Toughcats. A community dinner, to be offered in cooperation with the Vinalhaven School, is also in the planning stages.

For more information about the Vinalhaven Arts and Recreation Center and the ARCAfe, visit the Web site at vharc.org or call 863-4191.