



We are: A team

■ Page 2: Valley Elementary has a new football club, just one of many fun offerings.



We are: Finishing strong

■ Page 3: Valley's basketball team finished the 2021-2022 season in true championship style.



We are: Giving back

■ Page 5: Lucas Flores once attended Valley as a student. He recently returned as an employee. "I wanted to help somebody else the way that Valley helped me."

VALLEY COLLABORATIVE

Volume 10, Issue 3 News for the extended Valley Collaborative community Spring 2022

Valley Earns Top Marks

Dear Valley Community:

I am pleased to report that Valley has concluded its Coordinated Program Review with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), which began in March 2021 and included parent surveys, three days of onsite review and 24 staff interviews. We were informed by Christine Romancewicz, DESE's Specialized Program Liaison, during our exit interview that from her perspective Valley has achieved an "A+" and will be receiving a final report with no findings. Below are the recurring themes mentioned by Ms. Romancewicz during Valley's exit interview.



- DESE Parent survey results indicated that families were extremely pleased with their child's placement at Valley, quoting "they have found their home", "acceptance," "sense of safety," etc.
- Staff were very positive and appreciate the administrative support they receive in doing what is best for students.
- Staff were very committed to the mission and vision of Valley.
- From the paraprofessional in the classroom to the Executive Director and everyone in between, there was a consistent message regarding Valley's procedures



VALLEY COLLABORATIVE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DR. CHRIS A. SCOTT

and professional responsibilities and commitment to the students we educate.

- Rigorous academic curriculum across all programs was observed.
- A supportive culture for both students and staff across all programs was observed.
- Therapists, educators, and administrators worked on effective teams to deliver high quality therapeutic services and academics unique to each student at Valley.
- Procedural consistency across all programs was noted.
- Well trained staff across all programs was observed.
- Solid systems in place across all programs to ensure compliance with all state regulations.

*continued on page 7

Valley Elementary Comes Alive

It's springtime at Valley Elementary and that means springing into action. From roller skating to "Light and Color" STEM workshops to a Bubble Mania show, there is never a dull amount these days. Here's a look at some recent activities that elementary students have been involved in.

Rock and roll

What do you call a school on wheels? That would be the Valley Roller Kingdom" adventure day. The entire elementary school headed to the Tyngsboro roller rink, strapped on skates and enjoyed a fun-filled day of skating. Students and staff had a great time. While the skates are now off, the school hasn't stopped moving since!

In February, Crocodile River Music came to Valley for an African music performance. The large African band put on a show, taught students about African instruments, and gave students an opportunity to try some of them out. Then it was time for students to dance with the performers. Speaking of dancing, the annual Valley Valentine's Day dance party was back this year.

Making magic

March featured that magic Valley combination of learning and fun. As part of the Read Across America, Valley hosted a Dr. Seuss Magic Show. Later that month, outreach instructors from the Acton Discovery Center came to VCES and ran a day of "Light and Color" STEM workshops for students. It seems like almost every day some kind of learning adventure is on the schedule for Valley students.

Getting outside

As the weather gets nicer, students and staff are looking forward to getting outside, including going out for group hikes. Valley also has some brand new football and dance clubs that will get students moving and bring a renewed

RIGHT: AUBREY BORGET AT AN ALL SCHOOL FIELD TRIP TO ROLLER KINGDOM. BELOW: AN OUTREACH INSTRUCTOR FROM THE ACTON DISCOVERY CENTER LEADS A "LIGHT AND COLOR" STEM WORKSHOP.



sense of community and social interaction to the school.

The football club was created by third grader Jack Bucknam and fifth grader Michael Santiago. The idea for the club started earlier this year when Michael brought a football to school. The boys started throwing around the idea of a football club and quickly found some fans of the idea: 3rd grader Jeremiah Alerte and fourth grader Keegan Gilman.

When the group announced the first game of the season, half of the school participated. Since then the games have become a weekly affair. Each week the students put up flyers encouraging their classmates to join them outside for a little football. All are welcome. Boys, girls, doesn't matter what size. We're very friendly," says Keegan.

While there's a bit of a rivalry among the club leaders as to who is the best player—Michael has gloves, Jeremiah can throw—a shared love of football unites the group. "We all like the Patriots," says Jack. Well,



not everybody. "I like the Rams," says Michael.

Dance with Somebody

The new football club is just one of many clubs at Valley Elementary. But when sixth grader Jack Murphy looked around, he noticed one that was missing: a dance club. Thanks to Jack, Valley has a brand new club devoted to getting kids moving. In April, the club will host its first outdoor dance party. "The concept is for everyone to gather in the field," says Jack. "We'll do some stretches to kick things off and then start dancing." As for the music, an essential ingredient for any dance party, Jack says he likes all kinds: country, rock and roll, jazz. With music therapist Bryan Thomas spinning the tunes, you can be sure that Valley faves "Thunderstruck" and "Dance with Somebody" will make the cut.

Jack is currently spreading the word about the event, looking for students who love to dance as much as he does. He shouldn't have trouble finding kids who like to move. The dance party is scheduled to begin as soon as the Friday football game wraps up. ■

Alternative Middle/High School: A Championship Season

The 2021-2022 basketball season was a true example of the old saying “it’s not how you start, it’s how you finish”. At the start of the season, the excitement was through the roof because we were going to be able to compete against other schools. Last year, due to COVID, the program was limited and we could only have matchups against each other.

We learned quickly early on that we weren’t in the clear just yet as COVID popped up a few times and led to other teams canceling games. Between the cancellations and being on the wrong end of a few tough losses, things weren’t going exactly the way we hoped. The roster was fluid throughout the season with the addition of new students and other students missing some time.

About halfway through the season the focus of the program shifted toward the Greater Boston Basketball League (GBBL) Tournament at the end of the season. If we stuck together, improved as a team, and made it to the tournament, it would all be worth it. As that tournament approached, the team began to gel. The roster was firmed up and the intensity of practices and games was increasing.

As the team was still hunting for its first win, there were a couple of really close games that we weren’t able to win, however the confidence gained from them was obvious. That confidence was on full display at the GBBL Tournament from the minute the team walked onto campus at UMASS Lowell. The competitive spirit and teamwork that Valley displayed was incredible. The team came out on fire and won two games on the first day, propelling them into the Championship the following



PLAYERS ON VALLEY’S ALTERNATIVE MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL TEAM GOT OFF TO A SLOW START BUT FINISHED THE 2021-2022 SEASON IN CHAMPIONSHIP STYLE.

day. Confidence was sky high when the team returned to the school. The players were so proud of their accomplishment however there was one more game to take care of. There was a buzz at school as the other students and staff rallied around the team.

The morning of the championship there was one more unexpected hurdle. One of the team’s leaders and top scorers was unable to make it to school. Instead of panicking, the team talked about the importance of coming together and each elevating their game. The Championship game felt like a Championship should. The gym was packed and it just felt like a huge game. Valley got out to a hot start and took a 5 point lead into halftime. The other team was not going out easy however as they roared back in the second half to take the lead by 5 points. This type of situation can make or break a team. The leaders of the team stepped up and were determined to take the game

back.

The final few minutes were what sports are all about. Back and forth, big shot after big shot, teammates cheering each other on. At the end of regulation the game was tied and headed for overtime. Valley stepped up once again in the overtime period and after a huge 3 point shot, they were CHAMPIONS.

The way this season ended could not have been scripted together. Lessons were learned throughout the year. *Finish what you start. Believe in your team. Hard work will pay off.* These kids were so proud, and took from the tournament a confidence that cannot be gained in any other environment.

Walking back into school with the championship trophy, to ovations from everyone, is a memory this team will never forget. ■

Congratulations to this year’s GBBL Tournament champions!

Spring is Sprouting at Valley Transitional Middle/High School

Something is sprouting at Valley Collaborative. This year, Valley's Transitional Middle and High School has been partnering with Giving Gardens, a non-profit organization that seeks to educate students about where food comes from and inspire an interest in growing healthy.

Giving Grocers brought their mission to Valley Collaborative with multi-week programs diving into basic nutrition and gardening. Students began their growing with microgreens, followed by larger, take-home plants, all leading up to the students getting to plant, look after, and harvest from indoor, vertical planter towers. These planters are full of greens and herbs (all planted by students), and placed in one of their kitchen spaces. The students will get to not only watch as their plants grow and thrive, but enjoy the absolute freshest, healthiest foods that they can use in their home cooking.

We start off in the classroom with education on healthy eating and portion sizes," says Maggie Curran, an occupational therapist. "Then the students get to grow their own vegetables like pea shoots, spinach, and beans," says Maggie. The clay planters that are now home to a bounty of greens were also made by the students.

Maggie says that as the planters have begun to fill with sprouts, the students have gotten more excited. Cooking classes now start with a survey of which vegetables are ready to harvest and incorporate into the meals students are preparing.

Students are also learning about how to build balanced meals as well as how to make sense of nutrition labels. Staffers from Giving Gardens will even be accompanying students to the grocery store to help them work on making nutritious choices, including how to shop for produce that's in season—lessons that will last long after the current crop of veggies has been harvested.

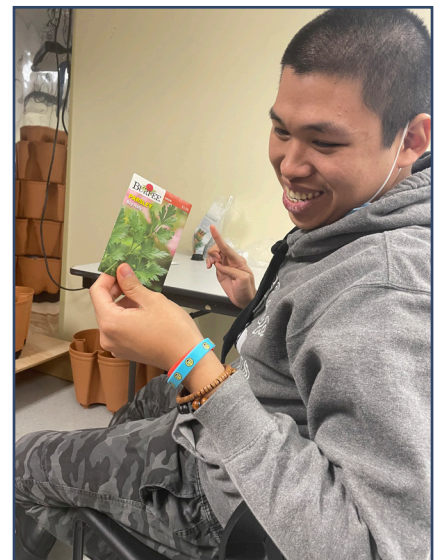
Maggie says the students' interest in seeing their own food grow has brought the issue of healthy eating home for them. "Overall, it's been great and the students are responding really well. Their interest makes it all the easier for them to enjoy and experience the nutritious produce they have grown. When they get to plant their own food, it just gives it that much more meaning." ■



TOP: EMILY ST. PIERRE SHOWS OFF A CLAY POT PLANTER MADE BY VALLEY STUDENTS AS AMY DOUCETTE FROM THE GIVING GARDENS PROJECT LOOKS ON; BOTTOM: COOPER KEOMANIVONG DISPLAYS SOME OF THE SEEDS THAT WILL SOON BE TURNING INTO VEGGIES, THANKS TO THE VALLEY STUDENTS' GREEN THUMBS.



SIGNS OF SPRING AT VALLEY!



Former Students Keep Valley Running

Lucas Flores graduated from Valley in 2019. After graduation he tried several different trades, including building police cars and towing cars for the State Police. Then one morning, he awoke with this thought: “I wonder what’s going on at Valley?” Lucas dropped by for a visit and the rest is history. “One of the maintenance workers told me that he needed someone to help him keep the facilities in top shape,” recalls Lucas. He responded without missing a beat. “I said ‘sign me up.’” Today Lucas works as part of the facilities crew at Valley and says that he loves it. “Every day is different.”

Preparing students to thrive in



LUCAS FLORES

the workplace after graduation has long been a central goal at Valley Collaborative. Now, a growing number of former students are returning to Valley to join the ranks of its employees, helping current students have a great educational experience.

Lucas says that returning to his former school has enabled him to connect with students. While he doesn’t like to brag, Lucas says that the middle school students adore him. “When I show up to school on my motorcycle they get very excited.” The students are also aware of Lucas’ goal to become a pilot and join the airline industry. “They’re rooting for me to succeed,” says Lucas.



JAY COLLINS

Unique bonds

Jay Collins graduated from Valley in 2008. He says that even during his two years as a student, he wanted to work at Valley and even served as a sort of junior staff person. He realized his dream seven years ago when he took a job as a teacher’s aid in Valley’s Alternative Middle/High School. Jay says that his experiences as a former student enable him to form unique bonds with current students. When he sees kids struggling socially or academically, he thinks back to his own student days. “I understand what they’re going through,” says Jay.

A role model

Logan Cardillo’s return to Valley was more recent. He graduated in 2019 and was searching for work when Assistant Principal Glen



LOGAN CARDILLO

Costello sent him an application. Logan filled it out and was hired soon after. He now works as a one-to-one aide in the Alternative Middle School program. Logan says that he can easily relate to where Valley students are coming from because he was one of them so recently. “The first week I was back a student found my yearbook picture. Let’s just say I was not the most photogenic student.”

In addition to working at Valley, Logan works part-time at a convenience store and attends UMass Boston where he is a junior majoring in



MATT DIAZ

criminology. He’s hoping to attend law school one day. In the meantime, he encourages current Valley students to consider college after graduation. “Especially for kids who maybe aren’t thinking about college, I can point to what I’m doing and say ‘see, you can do it too,’” says Logan.

Matt Diaz graduated from Valley’s Chelmsford campus in 2013. He pursued a degree in human services after graduation, spurred by his interest in therapy and psychology. While searching for work, Matt happened to recall that Julie Fielding, who had been the social worker for Valley’s Alternative Middle/High School, had recently become principal of the school.

Adult Services: Spring Has Sprung!

Spring has sprung, and the individuals in the Today & Tomorrow program are as busy as bees! In mid-March, the program welcomed more than a dozen individuals back onsite to Linnell Circle. Transitioning back to in-person programming after about two years of virtual services has been thrilling for our recent additions. Program members are not only excited to reconnect with others, but now have opportunities to practice hands-on employment skills and return to community work and volunteer sites. Most members of the program are now going out to paid worksites at

A return to in-person programming means reconnecting with others, practicing hands-on employment skills, and returning to community work and volunteer sites.

least 2 or 3 days per week, and fill their time otherwise with volunteer and CBDS activities. Our remote team continues to work as hard as ever too-- helping individuals keep skills sharp (and develop new ones!) for when we can add more people to our onsite programming.

Our daily schedules continue to grow as well, and recently we have added two great new volunteer opportunities to our CBDS programming. The adult program has recently partnered with Meals on Wheels in Tewksbury. Groups help pick up hot and cold food packs from a community center, navigate through the town to locate houses, and drop off meals to homebound seniors. This has allowed group members to practice their profession-



LEFT: SHARIFAH NAMIGADDE AT BRISTOL MEYERS SQUIBB.. AFTER TWO YEARS OF VIRTUAL SERVICES, MOST MEMBERS OF THE PROGRAM ARE NOW GOING OUT TO PAID WORKSITES AT LEAST TWO OR THREE DAYS PER WEEK .

al greetings and social skills—two major topics that we have covered in onsite CBDS programming. One individual in the program mentioned, “I like going there so that we can visit new people while helping them!”

Otherwise, groups have also started volunteering twice per week at Strongwater Farm, a therapeutic equestrian center in Tewksbury. Individuals have had opportunities to see how the farm runs and the importance of daily upkeep to keep the animals healthy and happy. They have spent time outside cleaning and refilling water buckets for animals, mucking stalls, and interacting with farm personnel. This has allowed individuals to increase their communication skills by working collaboratively to complete various projects, and given them more opportunities to get fresh air and engage in physical exercise. Seeing horses and other animals is a cute bonus, too! We look forward to continuing our partnerships with these great organizations so our individuals can develop meaningful connections in our community and promote positive leadership skills. ■

New Beginnings

New beginnings can be scary for someone venturing out on a new journey, but they can also be exciting, as this is a time full of opportunities. During the darkness of the pandemic, many bright new stars were born right here at Valley Collaborative. While welcoming these wonderful new individuals into the Today & Tomorrow program, many new opportunities were created for all.

Throughout the pandemic, Valley Collaborative was resilient and nurtured a virtual environment in which individuals felt safe and supported. And they thrived! While many people were isolated in their homes, Valley Collaborative offered a way for our individuals to stay connected to one another and their community. Valley Collaborative's Today and Tomorrow program continued to grow as they introduced a number of new individuals to the program during this time.

As each individual began their new journey here at Valley, he or she was greeted with kindness, enthusiasm, and excitement. The first day always included an opportunity for the new individual as well as current folks in the program to work on their social skills.

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Valley Earns Top Marks

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- The Department was impressed with Valley's timeout and restraint procedures and that students had the opportunity to de-escalate in various sensory spaces (for example "Chillville") before a timeout or restraint was needed.
- Incident reports were very detailed and explained in full the incident and the reason and rationale for all actions taken. Furthermore, a full explanation was given if a restraint or timeout room was required for a student to de-escalate.
- Students were quickly reintegrated back into the classroom after various de-escalation techniques were provided resulting in minimal disruption to time on learning which was observed across all programs.
- There is no technical support needed from the Department at this time.

It is a pleasure to work with such a high performing, committed and caring team. A special thank you to Joia Mercurio, Deputy Director, for her ongoing leadership and support. Valley is very fortunate to have the exemplary program Principals: Nicole Noska, Julie Fielding, Heather MacKay along with the exceptional teams they have built of educators, therapists, and paraprofessionals. We are so fortunate to have experienced and competent leaders working with our students, families, and staff.

We also gratefully acknowledge all of Valley's support staff for the pride they take in their work which ensures clean and safe learning environments for students and staff: Renato Silva, Ian MacAulay, Sandy Morency and their teams. The schools have never looked

better. We also want to recognize the "behind-the-scenes" hard work and dedication of the Technology Department and Administrative Support Staff: Mazyar Moshtaghi, Donna Suarez, Kelly Fitts, Karen Blackburn, Donna Driscoll and Kathy Diaz, to name a few.

Completing a program review during a pandemic presents unique challenges. Staffing shortages and health care protocols were constant stressors. Thanks goes to Kari Morrin, Director of Human Resources, for the countless hours of hard work and dedication she has put into our workforce. Sincere appreciation also goes to Lead Nurse Jessica Scalzi and her team for their tireless and significant support. Nurse Jessica Scalzi continues to go above and beyond to ensure all COVID procedures and protocols are followed to maintain the health and safety of students and staff.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Valley's Board of Directors, for their ongoing guidance and support as we navigate this important and difficult work. The board's support of Valley's staff and the work we do is continuously demonstrated through various Board votes, most recently the generous longevity package the Board voted in order to address retention and recruitment issues we have struggled with during this pandemic.

The Board's ongoing commitment to offering its staff competitive compensation, while maintaining some of the lowest tuition rates in the Commonwealth in a non-union setting, helps to ensure that we can recruit and retain staff that are among the most talented in the field.

Also, noteworthy, is their support of a robust and well-resourced curriculum which ensures our students are able to reach their full potential.

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New Beginnings

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Individuals were encouraged to introduce themselves and discuss a little bit about their interests such as hobbies and favorite work experiences. Eventually this process became more automatic, and individuals began to initiate this process on their own. Staff has continued to facilitate these social interactions at times throughout each day on Zoom and we have seen many friendships develop and grow throughout this time.

In addition to these amazing connections and friendships, program individuals have had the opportunity to take on more of a leadership role by helping new folks adjust to the Zoom schedule as well as demonstrate appropriate and professional social norms during meetings as they lead by example. This, not only has helped current folks to adopt better work habits, but has also been a great confidence booster for all. One of the Zoom facilitators, Patricia Evans, said, "I have noticed the individuals' confidence increase during this time and they are taking more initiative and interacting more."

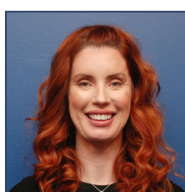
During a time of physical distance, where much of the world remained isolated, Valley's individuals overcame many challenges, adapted to new technologies, and welcomed in some amazing new faces that have truly added to the camaraderie of the Valley community. As we all continue to embrace new challenges and opportunities, we are reminded that we have the support and guidance of one another to help us get through anything that we may face in the future. ■

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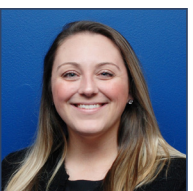
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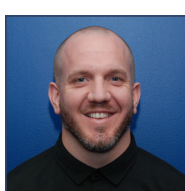
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Dr. Michael Flanagan
Superintendent, Tyngsborough Public Schools

Dr. Christopher Chew
Superintendent, Westford Public Schools

Top Marks for Valley

**continued from page 7*

Former Valley Students

**continued from page 5*

So he reached out to inquire about job opportunities. When she told him that there was a one-to-one aide position open, he jumped at the opportunity.

Matt says that his experience attending Valley has been a huge asset for him now that he works with students. "I get them and that enables me to create a rapport very easily."

Three years ago, Matt moved upstairs to the Transitional Middle/High School. He now works as a classroom registered behavior technician, assisting students who are primarily non-verbal. Matt says

that his current role requires him to be even more creative about how to connect with students. "One of the things I really appreciate about Valley is that there is always room for growth," says Matt, who attends UMass Lowell and is studying psychology. "No matter what you want to do they try to help you get to that point."

Matt, Jay, Logan and Lucas all say that returning to Valley as employees has enabled them to give back to a place that is special to them.

"I wanted to help somebody else the way that Valley helped me," says Lucas. ■

We would like to thank the Board of Directors for the confidence and trust they have in Valley to care for and educate some of their most vulnerable students.

Please know, we are committed to maintaining the highest quality programming for your/our students and to always be deserving of your support.

If you ever have a suggestion or need assistance, my door is always open.

My best to you,

Chris
Chris A. Scott, Ph.D.
Executive Director