



## We are: Transforming

■ Page 3: In a new feature, we get to know Valley's Board members, starting with Chair Tim Piwowar.



## We are: Inspired

■ Page 5: Emily Gilstrap background in archaeology informs her teaching at Valley Elementary School.



## We are: Creating

■ Page 8: Woodworking instructor Ron Stapleton is retiring. Meet a student he inspired.

# An Inspirational Place

Dear friends and families:

As the school year ends let us reflect upon some of the highlights that demonstrate why Valley Collaborative continues to be an inspirational place to go to school and to work.

Valley Received 100% from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) on its Mid-Cycle Coordinated Program Review which ensures that school districts are in full compliance with state and federal laws and regulations.

Utilizing IXL as a digital learning tool to individualize math instruction, Valley Elementary, Valley Middle, and Valley Transitional High School students:

- Answered over 190,000 questions
- Practiced over 5,660 skills;
- Demonstrated proficiency in 3,552 skills
- Mastered 3,000 skills

Valley Elementary, Valley Middle, and Valley Transitional High School students:

- Became readers – 63% of Middle School students scored below basic in September and only 38% scored below basic in May
- 10% of beginner decoders became developing decoders at the Elementary School
- Over 1,000 books purchased



VALLEY COLLABORATIVE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR DR. CHRIS A. SCOTT

Valley Elementary School (2018-2019):

- After making significant progress 11 students will successfully return to their public school district in 2019-2020

Valley Transitional High School (2018-2019):

- 9 students passed the Math MCAS
- 5 students passed the ELA MCAS
- 8 students passed the Biology MCAS
- 4 Valley Transitional High School students were enrolled in 6 dual enrollment courses at Middlesex Community College
- 10 students took the Accuplacer college placement test
- 14 Valley Transitional High School students are college bound

# An Inspirational Place to Work and Learn

»continued from cover

- Valley extended its partnerships with the Department of Developmental Services and The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission by entering into ten year contract agreements valid through June, 30, 2029.
- Two new federally-funded adult programs were added this year: Agency with Choice and Ticket to Work. These programs offer more flexible and individualized services than traditional program models and will allow Valley the opportunity to provide services to an even more diverse population.
- Valley proudly won the Department of Developmental Services video contest for the best DDS promotional video in the Commonwealth.

- Forty six Massachusetts Rehabilitation clients and six Department of Developmental Services clients found new jobs this year through Valley's employment programs. In other words, employers are now contributing more than \$72,000.00 in new monthly wages to the local economy.
- Valley initiated a peer mentorship model at competitive worksites to increase job stability and retention for individuals receiving employment services.
- Valley has experienced unprecedented success and growth in the programming it provides



PATRICK BLADES AND LUIS COLON ARE PART OF VALLEY'S NEW PEER MENTORSHIP PROGRAM, AIMED AT FACILITATING JOB STABILITY AND RETENTION AMONG INDIVIDUALS RECEIVING EMPLOYMENT SERVICES.

for adults (over 22) with special needs. Valley Collaborative Adult Program Revenue has increased by 82% to 2.8 million dollars over the last five years.

- Small business revenue has increased by 63% over the last five years due to our strong business partnerships. Valley added two new small business partners who provide DDS worksites - The Town of Billerica and Especially Sweet Needs in Chelmsford, MA.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our families and all stakeholders who faithfully support the Valley mission – Building a community that empowers children and adults to find their own way.

It is a privilege to serve. ■

My best to you always,

*Chris*

Chris A. Scott, Ph.D.  
Executive Director

## Thank You to Our Generous Donors

Each year Valley Collaborative offers businesses in the area the opportunity to donate toward the extracurricular recreation activities Valley provides our students and adults. We plan educational trips and recreational activities to enrich the lives of those we educate. Because today's economy can make it difficult for families to afford these experiences, we ask for financial assistance so that we can offer scholarships to deserving students and adults.

This year, we had 16 businesses donate over \$7,500; in addition, we have received over \$750 'in kind' donations.

We sincerely appreciate the ongoing support for the work we do with the most vulnerable people in our society.

### Gold

Enterprise Bank & Trust. Co. \$5000

### Silver

Marathas Barrow Weatherhead Lent, LLP, \$1000

### Bronze

Stoneham Motor Co., Inc., \$500  
 Fritz Deguglielmo LLC, \$250  
 Industrial Floor Covering, Inc. \$200  
 Lyons & Rogers LLC, \$200  
 Anthony J. Bent, \$100  
 Abinoor's Carpet Craft, \$100  
 Mancini Sheet Metal, Inc., \$100  
 O'Connor Hardware, \$100  
 PARS OPEB Trust Program, \$100  
 QPL Inc. & The Image Group, \$100  
 Cristia Leshner Associates LLC, \$50  
 Arnold M. Kerzner Counseling LLC, \$50  
 O'Connor Portraiture Inc., \$50  
 Security Design Inc., \$50

# Getting to Know You: Tim Piowar

As a member, and current chair, of Valley Collaborative's Board of Directors, Billerica Superintendent Tim Piowar has spent years overseeing Valley's transformation. "I've gotten to see all of these incredible changes at the board level," says Tim, who joined Valley's board in 2012, soon after taking the helm of the Billerica Public Schools. Tim recently sat down with Site 2 student Luis Algarin and media instructor Jennifer Berkshire to talk about his role as Board chair, and what he thinks schools in districts like Billerica can learn from Valley's successes. *Note: We'll be getting to know the other members of Valley's Board in future editions of the newsletter.*

**Jennifer Berkshire: What makes Valley different from a school district like Billerica?**

**Tim Piowar:** From my time, first as a member of Valley's Board and then as chair, I've come to see that Valley has a unique ability to challenge constraints, something that can be more difficult in a district the size of Billerica. I like to think, though, that even if we may not be able to replicate what Valley is doing, we can still be inspired by it.

**Luis Algarin: One thing that I really like about Valley is how small it is. Students can really form relationships with teachers. Do you think that's possible at a big public school?**

**Tim:** That's why Valley exists, for kids who need much higher levels of support. The size of public schools definitely makes it harder to have the low staff-to-student ratio you see at Valley. The challenge is money. We have a program at the Parker School where students get more individualized attention. Also, our brand new

high school was designed after extensive "visioning" with students about what they wanted school to look like. So we intentionally made the design really flexible, and we thought a lot about what students coming into high school need in order to be successful. For example, eighth grade is being incorporated into the new high school, setting students up for a more successful transition to ninth grade.

**Luis: I really like that idea. Going into high school that first year, you're definitely not ready.**

**Tim:** We ended up reconfiguring our other schools in order to move eighth grade to the high school. The middle schools will now be grades five through seven, and our elementary schools will be kindergarten through fourth grade. One elementary school, the Vining is closing. Our hope is that by giving eighth graders a year to sort of get used to the high school experience—they'll be up on the top floor, in their own area—that students will be better prepared to make that switch. All of the research shows that if they're not successful in ninth grade, they're more likely to drop out.

**Jennifer: What's a typical day like for the Superintendent of the Billerica Public Schools?**

**Tim:** There is no typical day. My favorite day is when I get to be in schools, which is as often as I can. I need to make sure that teachers, principals and other adults have



BILLERICA SUPERINTENDENT AND CHAIR OF VALLEY COLLABORATIVE'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS TIM PIOWAR OVERSEES CONSTRUCTION AT THE NEW BILLERICA HIGH SCHOOL.

what they need to be successful, whether it's materials or space or just eliminating distractions. Lots of people have ideas about what should be done in classrooms but teachers know best.

**Jennifer: Did you always know that you wanted to be a superintendent?**

**Tim:** No way. I went to college to be a computer programmer. I studied theoretical math at MIT, but I fell in love with teaching while doing SAT prep and I never looked back. After my student teaching at Cambridge Rindge and Latin, I came to Billerica in 1997 as a math teacher. It's a community that I love. Billerica has so much untapped potential. The work we do with kids is key to unlocking the potential in this community. It reminds me a lot of Buffalo, where I grew up. It's an historically blue collar community of good, hard-working people who care about the things that really matter. ■

*Luis Algarin is a Site 2 sophomore. Jennifer Berkshire teaches journalism and coordinates the newsletter at Valley.*

# At Valley Elementary, Music Works

There is an alien in the music room at Valley Elementary School—but have no fear, it’s imaginary, and the friendly kind. Students in Bryan Thomas’ music group are singing what’s known as a stack song in which each student adds a line to the song, building on a theme: “There’s an alien in the classroom.” As Bryan strums the melody on his guitar, four 10 and 11 year olds chime in, and the song starts to take shape. The aliens are here to help us. We’re all headed to Jupiter. Then back to earth. But we forgot to take off our space suits!

Welcome to music therapy, Valley style. Behind the zany space-themed lyrics is a serious purpose. As Bryan explains, the stack song provides students with an opportunity to practice flexible thinking, including listening to other people’s perspectives and responding appropriately. For the song to work, students have to go with the flow. When a student suggests a trip to the zoo for the next line, Bryan gently points out that the space travelers are still on Jupiter, roughly 365 million miles away from the nearest zoo. “He had an idea but he had to change it. That’s flexible thinking,” explains Bryan.

Bryan has always had a passion for music. He drummed all through high school and knew that he wanted to pursue some kind of career that would let him continue to drum, sing and strum. Research led him to music therapy, a field that he’d never heard of before. He ended up getting his degree in music therapy and did an internship at Perkins School for the Blind before joining Valley in 2008. Explains Bryan: “In music therapy, music is the tool to reach a non-musical goal. That’s different than music education where the goal

While the music room may be the only place that students get to pound out their feelings using bongo drums, the four students in today’s groups, one of 22 groups Bryan sees, are all working on similar communications and behavioral goals elsewhere at Valley. “Our approach is really interdisciplinary,” says Bryan. “I stay in touch with the other teachers, speech therapists and behavioral aides and we keep track of the progress the students are making.”

Music can also be a way of reaching students who aren’t engaged in school, says Bryan. He recalls a student new to Valley who was having a difficult time transitioning and had largely shut down, until Bryan began writing songs with her. “It really became a way to begin to build a positive relationship with the school community.”

Their song successfully ‘stacked,’ it’s time for these students to say goodbye—in a suitably musical way. As Bryan sends them off with a chorus of “music time is finished, see you next time,” the students accompany him using boomwhackers, plastic tubes tuned to a particular music pitch. One student gets a shout out for matching his volume and pitch to the others in the group. “That was something he was struggling with earlier and now he’s making progress,” says Bryan. Just what we like to hear! ■



VALLEY ELEMENTARY MUSIC THERAPIST BRYAN THOMAS DRUMS WITH STUDENTS IN A MUSIC GROUP.



JACOB DUMAIS, PLAYS THE PART OF CHARLIE, IN THE FIZZY LIFTING ROOM OF WILLIE WONKA'S CHOCOLATE FACTORY. DUMAIS AND VALLEY STUDENTS JOSEPH DISTEFANO, TONY BERRY, ANDREW BLAIS, MARCUS MENGISTAB, MARY ALICE JACKSON, NATE BERRY, ARUN MAUDGAL AND NATE STEIGERWALD BROUGHT DOWN THE HOUSE WITH THEIR PERFORMANCE OF WILLIE WONKA, JR.

# A STEM Teacher who ‘Digs’ Art, Science

When Emily Gilstrap gave up her career as a traveling archaeologist for the more stable life of a teacher, she worried that life in the classroom might not compare to the thrill of a dig. “I thought I was going to be stepping away from the excitement but that hasn’t been the case at all,” says Emily, a science teacher at Valley Elementary.

Emily fell in love with archaeology early. A lesson on Native Americans when she was in kindergarten triggered what would become a life-long passion: to help tell the stories of people in the past, especially those who have been underrepresented in official accounts. “We underestimate people of the past. And when there isn’t a record of them, we just assume that they were less advanced,” says Emily.

She ended up parlaying a childhood fascination into a career, working in cultural resource management in her native California. When construction projects touched on areas that housed native remains Emily would be brought in to ensure that the remains were treated in accordance with the wishes of local tribes. Then there was the time that an artichoke farmer encountered a tusk in his field and Emily was summoned to dig up what would turn out to be a mammoth.

After attending graduate school in England, Emily realized another dream: working in Africa. She traveled to Kenya to work with a prominent archaeologist and locals on environmental reconstruction. “I could hear the hyenas howling at night,” recalls Emily.

Then, as she puts it, life got real. Now married with a child, Emily knew she needed a more stable existence than archaeology afforded. Her transition from the dig site to

the school site was aided by yet another passion: ballet. A dancer since childhood, Emily had been teaching dance for more than a decade. Now she began to think about combining her love of science and art in the classroom, two things she believes go hand in hand. She spent a year working as a long-term sub in an autism classroom in the Boston Public Schools. “I really plunged right into the deep end,” recalls Emily.

When she came across a job description last summer for a science



EMILY AT WORK DIGGING UP A STONE TOOL FROM A PALEOLITHIC SITE IN THE NAIVASHA BASIN, KENYA.

teacher at Valley Elementary who would use the school’s greenhouse as a living classroom, Emily felt that the position had been written just for her. “It was an eclectic job description and I’m an eclectic person.”

So what’s a typical day for Emily? While each day is different, she starts out by checking on the school’s resident chickens. Her passion for science is reflected in the lab-style experiments that her students conduct. They are currently learning about chemical reactions, osmosis, and cell development via a series of what she calls “egg-speriments,”



VALLEY ELEMENTARY STEM TEACHER EMILY GILSTRAP POSES NEXT TO A MAMMOTH TUSK THAT WAS DISCOVERED ON AN ARTICHOKE FARM IN CASTROVILLE, CALIFORNIA.

making use of the school’s abundant supply of eggs. “And we have fun with the eggs at the end,” says Emily.

Emily divides her time between the Valley Elementary STEM Lab and its “living classrooms,” which now include a chicken coop, a greenhouse, complete with a pond, and gardens. In caring for the chickens students get an up-close look at the life cycle in progress, but they’re also

learning empathy and kindness, says Emily. She’s currently working with students to set up a compost site to teach her students about decomposition, conservation and renewable resources. “This is an opportunity for them to learn all about decomposition in a really hands-on way.”

While archaeology may have been Emily’s first love, she says that she has no regrets whatsoever for trading careers. “When that light bulb goes off because students have figured something out for themselves, that’s the most rewarding thing in the world,” says Emily. “I love teaching more than anything I’ve ever done.” ■

## Something's Cooking in Site 3

Does anyone else have difficulty price comparison shopping, staying within a budget and creating a tasty nutritional meal? If so, then maybe the students in the Transitional High School can help.

"It's referred to as a 'Cooking Day' but it's so much more than that," says Transitional High School Principal Nicole Noska. "It provides students the unique opportunity to hone their skills in math, literacy, and social pragmatics all under the supervision of classroom teachers and therapists looking to work on targeted IEP goals," explains Nicole.

Here's a look at a typical Cooking Day in the Transitional High School. Students first work collectively to decide on what nutritional dishes they will create. They're presented with a budget. Then it's time to create a shopping list. After ensuring that all ingredients are on the list and the total purchase price is within the budget, it's off to Market Basket to acquire the ingredients. "They know

their way around Market Basket. No matter what ingredient it is, they'll find it," says classroom teacher John Shea. "A bustling grocery store can often be an intimidating and difficult place to successfully navigate and they now do it with relative ease."

Some students enter the Transitional High School without ever having shopped for groceries, followed a multi-step recipe or run a dishwasher. But by winter break students are creating nutritionally balanced meals, and leaving school kitchens immaculate, with only minimal staff assistance. This independence builds greater self-confidence which often carries over to other aspects of student life.

"Some of these students ultimately choose a career in the culinary industry and are able to hit the ground running," says Vocational Coordinator Scott Morin. "The feedback from work sites has been extremely



RILEY LADUKE CHOPS UP SOME WATERMELON ON COOKING DAY.

positive."

Don't let the tasty spaghetti and meatballs or the variety of veggies in the garden salad fool you. Cooking Day is clearly not just about the food. Bon appetit! ■

## Training Day: Creating Better Student Transitions

On May 7th and 8th three members of the Valley Collaborative Leadership Team attended the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education training: Linking IEP Development and the Secondary Transition Process. This two-day intensive training focused on writing transition-rich IEPs and planning for the delivery of high-quality transition services for students with IEPs, aged 14-22.

Karen Rowe, Valley's Transition Specialist, noted that "the training was thorough and the facilitators were highly engaging and knowledgeable about the subject. Our team was excited to find that we already employ many of

the transition planning innovations suggested, such as Person Centered Planning and Work Based Learning Plans. We even had the opportunity to share our Person Centered Planning Tool with the facilitators who, in turn, shared it with the other participants." Taking this information and using it to inform and align the IEP with the Transition Planning Form was the pinnacle of the training for the Valley team.

"We came away with strategies for writing more effective IEP goals based on more descriptive present levels of performance," said Lia Metrakas, Assistant Principal of the Valley Transitional High School. Rowe agreed, adding, "informal as-

sessments are just as important as formal testing. Be sure that the IEP documents all of the transition rich work that you do." ■



# Site 3: Gaining Ground and Perspective

When Site 3 Transitional Middle and High School students arrive at Gaining Ground, a non-profit organic farm in Concord, they have no idea what specific tasks they'll be assigned. And that's part of what makes the group's regular trips to the farm so much fun, says Alannah Cavallaro. "It all depends on what needs to be done and what the weather is like."

Valley's partnership with Gaining Ground dates back nearly two decades. Students from Valley are among the several thousand community volunteers that help the farm grow organic produce and give it away to area meal programs and food pantries. "The philanthropy is important but it's also a way of connecting them to food and the environment in a positive way," says teacher John Shea. "Now when we go to Market Basket to get ready for cooking day they understand where the food comes from."

On a recent trip to Gaining Ground, one of several Valley students have made this year, the group was assigned a whole range of tasks

SITE 3 MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT ADAM CONANT WEEDS A VEGETABLE BED AT GAINING GROUND FARM IN CONCORD. VALLEY HAS HAD A PARTNERSHIP WITH THE STARVATION RELIEF FARM GOING BACK TWO DECADES.



to get the farm ready for the busy growing season ahead. Freshman Adam Harris was part of a crew that secured tarps with sandbags, part of Gaining Ground's use of non-chemical methods to keep weeds at bay. Alannah and Josh Soly-Poirer were part of the anti-weed patrol, plucking unwanted guests from farm fields that will soon be full of

potatoes, carrots, peas, cucumbers, radishes and lettuce. "It's easy work but it gets hard," says Josh.

On previous trips, the students have gotten to see for themselves where Gaining Ground's produce ends up. Riley LaDuke recalls seeing a pickup truck loaded with crates coming to collect vegetables. "It felt great to see that it was actually going someplace," says Riley. He and the other Valley volunteers say that they love the idea that their digging, weeding, picking and washing helps get food to people who otherwise might not have enough. "I really like going because it helps people and it's kind of fun. You help the crops and it's actually really satisfying and entertaining, and you're doing it for a great cause," says Alannah.

Another trip to Gaining Ground is scheduled for the fall, the height of harvest season. Riley says that he's already looking forward to getting back to work. "I'd do it again and again and again and again." ■



SITE 3 MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS EVAN OLSON, ADAM CONANT AND NOLAN MCCARTHY, JOINED BY A GAINING GROUND FARMER, TAKE A BREAK FROM WEEDING.

# Site 1: Getting Creative in Woodshop

By Faith Ruiz

I was really shy and quiet when I first started going to the woodshop but I feel like it opened a new doorway for me. I realized that woodworking is another form of art and that I can do it. On the days that I'm in the woodshop, I can let my creativity loose. I can carve things, I can get creative with paint. Basically you get to customize your own stuff.

I've made a bench, a shelf, sleds and a staff. Typically I'll get an idea and sketch it out on paper and then I'll show it to Ron and he'll figure out the easiest way to make it happen. He's very interested in the work I do and is often surprised by what I come up with. One time I had an idea for a bed canopy frame. Another time I wanted to make a rocking horse for a Valley staff member who was pregnant. Actually I wanted to make a rocking unicorn, but Ron pointed out that the horn might be unsafe for a baby.

I started coming to the woodshop when I was 14 and in that time Ron has become like a father to me. I talk to him about everything, especially in moments of stress. Ron is always in a good mood—he's very bubbly and he loves to joke around. He's also very helpful. For example, I realized that Northside teacher Richard Clegg didn't have anything to keep his pencils and pens in and that they were all over his desk. So I decided to make him a cup that said "Richard of the Northside." I shared my idea with Ron and asked him how we could do it and that's how I learned how to create a round shape out of wood.

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If Valley woodworking instructor Ron Stapleton has one regret it's that he didn't start working at Valley earlier.

Ron took over the Valley woodshop five years ago after spending decades working in construction, including building and remodeling houses. After an accident cut his carpentry career short, Ron was in search of a way to put his skills to use when he heard that Valley was in need of someone to oversee its vocational woodworking program. "I applied and I thank Dr. Scott for giving me the opportunity to work here."

In his time at Valley Ron says that he's noticed a distinct shift in the nature of the students who want to learn woodworking. In his early years, students from the vocational high school program came to the woodshop because they were eager to learn a trade. "They wanted to learn the skills necessary so that they could work in construction," says Ron. More recently his star students are girls who see woodworking as a creative pursuit. Stop by the woodshop these days and you're likely to find Faith Ruiz and Nicole Kearns hard at work on a wood creation. "They like to bring sketches to me of things they're inspired to make," says Ron. "A picture frame, a bookcase, a rocking horse—you name it. I help them figure out how to turn their concepts into a reality."

Ron, who is hanging up his tools at the end of the school year, predicts that he'll have plenty to keep him busy in retirement. "My wife has a long list - you know what they say about the carpenter's house needing work!" But saying goodbye to his students won't be easy. In his time at Valley, Ron has bonded with plenty of aspiring woodworkers, as well as with students who are more interested in talking to him than in joinery or furniture finishing. "Some students stop by the workshop just to say hello," says Ron. "They're like my own kids. That's the only way I can say it." ■



RON STAPLETON WITH SITE 1 STUDENT AND ASPIRING WOODWORKER FAITH RUIZ.

Thanks for everything, Ron. We'll miss you!

## Site 2: Bringing History to Life, Bloxel by Bloxel

When history teacher Rachael Wedge assigned her students the task of bringing a previous decade to life, she urged them to use a high-tech tool to explore the past. Students in Rachael's class have been using Bloxels, a program for coding video games. Student Logan Cardillo recently asked Rachael about why she thinks history and technology make for a great match in the classroom.

### Logan: How did you get the idea to start using Bloxels in your classroom?

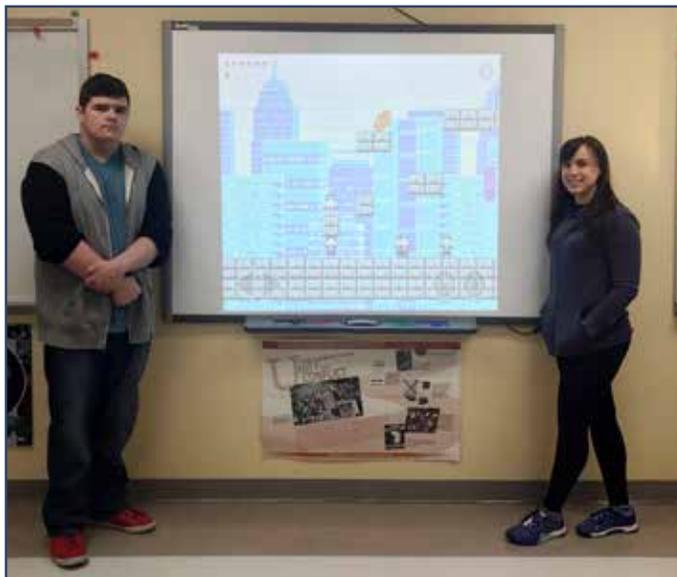
Rachael: Glen [Assistant Principal Glen Costello] told us about a new coding program and I volunteered to experiment with it. I wanted to try using it in a hands-on project so I piloted it during our weekly STEAM elective. The game aspect of Bloxels interested me too. The students all like games—we all like games. We're all children at heart. We're all big on the next big thing.

### Logan: How have you incorporated Bloxels into student projects?

Rachael: I made Bloxels an option for the history projects we've been working on. The game allows you to integrate text blocks so students could highlight key details or events of an era. We did a project on roaring '20's, and another one on the 1980's. For example, Logan explored Philadelphia in the 1980's and he made his main character Rocky.

### Logan: I also added in Ivan Drago, yuppies, and Philly cheese steak.

Rachael: Yes you did. Students design characters—like Rocky or Madonna—backgrounds and storylines to create a whole video game world.



SITE 2 SENIOR LOGAN CARDILLO AND RACHAEL WEDGE, VALLEY HISTORY TEACHER AND STEM SUPERSTAR, SHOW OFF A VIDEO GAME LOGAN CREATED USING BLOXELS. LOGAN DESIGNED THE GAME TO BRING 1980'S-ERA PHILADELPHIA TO LIFE.

They can make a cityscape, or create countryside, add new characters, take others away. There are so many possibilities and it's all done using color-coded blocks.

### Logan: Besides Bloxels, what are some of the other ways you incorporate tech into history class?

Rachael: I started with a program called Tinkercad that allows students to create in three dimensions. I've also used Adobe Sparks and had students build websites. Some kids do their own coding using C++. I'm always thinking about how to use technology to complement what we're learning about history. It's a great way to give students more choice in how they want to learn and build their projects around that.

### Logan: Which student would you say had the best Bloxels game? (Hint, hint...)

Rachael: No comment. ■

*Logan Cardillo is a Site 2 senior. Rachael Wedge has taught history at Valley for five years and was recently named 'STEM superstar' by her colleagues.*

## Woodshop

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I've always had a thing for art but woodworking has widened my understanding of what art can be. It goes very wide for me now: painting, drawing, sculpting, digital, even makeup. Spending time in the woodshop has made me see that you can literally create anything you want. My favorite project this year was a staff that I made to go with a halloween costume. Picture a sort of swirly stick thing with moon cutouts on top. Unfortunately it was a little too fragile and it broke before I could decide how I wanted to paint it. I'm still glad I made it though. You never know what you like until you try it. And if you can't do it on your own, Ron will help you. ■

*Faith Ruiz is a Site 1 senior. After graduation, she plans to attend college and start an art business.*

# Colleen Bird: Drawing for a Cause



COLLEEN BIRD, PART OF VALLEY'S TODAY AND TOMORROW PROGRAM, HAS BEEN DRAWING HER WHOLE LIFE.

When Colleen Bird expressed her frustration over having to conform to what she considered an arbitrary dress code requirement for a job interview, Transition Specialist Karen Rowe had a suggestion: why not express her feelings in a comic strip? Colleen put pen to paper—or rather, finger to iPad—and got to work. “I was told to steer clear of clothing that might be perceived as too distracting,” says Colleen. “Which got me thinking ‘what about the things that distract me?’” The result, displayed here, captures what the world looks like through Colleen’s eyes.

“As you zoom in, you get to feel what it’s like to be as distracted by the buttons on a polo shirt as I am,” Colleen explains.

Karen, who has worked with Colleen since she enrolled in the School and Vocational Training program after graduating from Chelmsford High School, says she was thrilled to see what Colleen had come up with. “It’s amazing how she was

able to capture that feeling. You’re fixated on that

button,” says Karen. She also recognized that with her drawing, Colleen was tapping into something important. “This is something a lot of our students can relate to. They don’t always see themselves represented,” says Karen.

Colleen has been drawing for as long as she can remember. A version of the Mona Lisa that she drew in first grade still hangs on her bedroom wall. “I didn’t know how to draw fingers yet so the hands look really strange,” says Colleen. Her interest in transforming her obsessive-compulsive disorder into art dates back to childhood when a therapist suggested that she draw a ‘worry monster.’ These days she draws inspiration from the video games she’s been playing since she was four, and from the world around her. Says Colleen: “I like to take a situation and make something out of it.”

While drawing has long been a passionate hobby, Colleen has recently gotten more serious about trying to pursue cartooning as a source of livelihood. Now, in addition to joining Individuals on daily trips to designated Valley work sites, Colleen is also able to spend a few hours each week working on her cartoons and learning about self-employment. “It’s been great for her,” says Job Developer Lisa Phillion. “It’s been really helpful for her in terms of finishing things, but also showing Colleen that ‘yeah, I can do this.’”

The Today and Tomorrow program, and the Individuals with whom she now spends her days, have also given her new inspiration for her drawing. Colleen acknowledges that she was initially a little nervous about transitioning to the Today and Tomorrow program from Site 3.

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# Today and Tomorrow: Building Skills, Friendships

**V**an #22 is headed to Lowell this morning, job coach Steve Heasley at the wheel. Our destination: the Merrimack Valley Food Bank to pick up food for low-income residents of Lowell. Heasley's four assistants, Andrew Young, Jenna Masotta, Colleen Bird and Eric Horan, are all part of Valley's Today and Tomorrow program. The trip to the Food Bank, a designated job site, followed by delivery of canned goods and fresh produce to several city apartment buildings, enables the Individuals to develop skills as well as get out into the community.

"They're providing a much needed service and everyone looks forward to seeing them," says Steve. "And I'm there to keep an eye on things."

Steve started working at Valley five and a half years ago after illness forced him to give up his career as a construction worker. He worked part time as a driver, and his rapport with the Individuals was immediate and obvious. "Somebody said 'you know, you'd be a great job coach.' I gave it a try and I loved it."

Twice a week Steve leads a group like this one to a job site. But it's not all work, he notes. There are also regular adventures out in the community, including nearby spots like the Tewksbury Library, as well as farther-flung destinations. Steve recently led a group to Wolf Hollow in Ipswich to view grey wolves in their natural environment. Once summer arrives, they'll take in free music shows in Lowell. "The goal is to get them out into the community and having fun," says Steve.

On this day, one Individual seems to be having an especially good time. Eric has snagged the van's front seat next to Steve and is all smiles. As Steve recalls, Eric was on the very



JOB COACH STEVE HEASLEY  
WITH ERIC HORAN.

first route that he had as a Valley driver. Eric took to Steve and vice versa. Once a month they do something fun together: a movie, mini-golf, bowling, or grabbing a bite to eat. "We became buddies," recalls Steve.

Of course, there's still work to do on today's trip to Lowell. When Steve and his crew arrive at the housing complex, a resident is waiting in the lobby to greet them. "They're always so courteous and kind," says Kitty. "Every time they come here is a treat."

Work done for the day, it's time to head back to Valley for lunch. Later, Steve will be captaining another trip to Lowell, to the YMCA. "We get some exercise and have a good time." While the group of Individuals changes from trip to trip, one name is almost certain to be among them: Eric. "He loves to ride the exercise bike," says Steve. ■

## Colleen Bird

»continued from page 10

But meeting and working with Individuals, many of whom have disabilities that are far more serious than hers, has also presented an opportunity says Colleen. "The more time I spent with them the more curious I got. Some of the people are nonverbal and as I got to know them I started trying to figure out other ways to communicate with them."

Colleen is now at work on a series of comics that feature a character much like her. By capturing her perspective and experience on the page, Colleen hopes that she can give the rest of the world some insight into what life looks like through her eyes. Her new work, says Colleen, may include a special education school, even an adult program. "Not this one, but one like it," says Colleen. "I wouldn't depict people I know in real life. I don't want the characters to be identifiable," says Colleen.

Karen, Lisa and the other Valley adult services staff are cheering her on. "Colleen is amazingly talented and she's speaking to an audience that is so often overlooked," says Karen. "She's sharing her own experiences but she's also representing a whole ~~gets depicted~~ of people that never

*Look for more of Colleen Bird's comic art to appear in future editions of the Valley newsletter.*

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