



## We are: Creating

■ Page 2: Valley's focus on the arts is helping students find their creative spirits — and build skills along the way.



## We are: Looking Ahead

■ Page 4: Middle school students who meet classroom expectations get to explore the world as a reward.



## We are: Working

■ Page 7: Former School-to-Work student Cole Nardone is starting a new career with the help of some Valley friends.

# Turning a Vision into Reality

Dear friends and families:

Happy spring! Valley describes its mission as building a community that empowers children and adults with special needs to find their own way. In this issue of our newsletter we'd like to tell you about the programming and supports that are helping us turn that vision into a reality for the students and adults Valley serves.

Along with a rigorous reading and assessment program at all levels, our students have art, music, outdoor and indoor physical education, authentic learning opportunities through field trips, a robust STEM curriculum and social skills development with various therapies throughout the day and during after-school programs. This creative programming engages our students' creativity and offers them project-based learning that builds the essential skills they'll need when they leave school.

Valley's programming for middle-school students is focused on helping them transition to high school and beyond. Students in Valley's Site 2 Middle School who meet expectations in the classroom have the opportunity to stretch their wings on field trips and practice developing their life skills in the "real world." You will also read about our innovative peer-to-peer mentoring program, in which Valley high school students serve as role models for their younger peers.



Finally, our DDS program - Today and Tomorrow - is helping the adults that we serve realize the goal of working and living independently.

Whether our students are finding their creative voices through art, music or STEM projects, or developing the vocational and transitional skills for competitive employment as adults, Valley is helping them to find their way so that they might realize their fullest potential.

I hope that you are as inspired by this issue of the newsletter as I am. ■

My best to you always,

*Chris*

Chris A. Scott, Ph.D.  
Executive Director

# The Valley Way: Art at the Heart

At Valley an art project is never just about art. Take a recent group activity involving a handful of Site 2 middle school students painting elaborate designs beneath the dim violet glow of a black light. Call it ‘glow in the dark art,’ ‘stained glass class’ or ‘fluorescent-colored fun,’ the project represented the mix of creativity and social skills-building that art teacher Libby DeBoalt loves.

“This is one of my favorite activities,” says Libby, who is currently in her seventh year teaching art at Valley. “It’s one that I use with students of all different ages and abilities. If someone wants to take it to the next level, there is a lot of freedom and flexibility for them to do that. And students also think the black lights are really cool.”

## Getting Creative

On this particular afternoon, while the middle schoolers are getting creative with fluorescent paint and Tiffany-inspired designs, Libby uses the opportunity to teach them some relevant terms and informa-

tion about how stained glass is made—even working in a bit of history about the art nouveau movement. While the students may be unaware of it, the black lights do more than just make the vivid paints ‘pop.’ “The lights calm everyone down so that we can really focus on the art,” says Libby.

Observe Libby in action and her love for what she does is obvious. That’s because her role at Valley combines her two great passions: teaching and art. Libby fell in love with teaching at the ripe age of 16, when she led a rock climbing course at the Boston Rock Gym. She went on to major in education at UMass Dartmouth, then worked as a teachers aide at Masconomet High School, the same school that she attended.

## Inner Exploration

During a recent class at Valley Elementary, Libby brings out a stack of pig-shaped stencils to mark the start of—what else?—the Year of the Pig. While a group of fifth graders traces around the stencils, Libby teaches them about Chinese New Year and its traditions, as well as the difference between a solar and lunar calendar.

Like many of Libby’s art projects, there is an opening here for what she describes as inner exploration. Once the students have finished cutting, how they choose to design their pig is entirely up to them.

One student adds wings to his pig and names him “Pig-a-Sus”; another fashions a punk-rock version, complete with a studded collar.



ART TEACHER LIBBY DEBOALT SHOWS OFF A RECENT STUDENT ART PROJECT: WINTER TREES IN SILHOUETTE

“I’m always in search of projects that are really going to fire kids’ imaginations,” says Libby.

## A Therapeutic Approach

Libby embraces a therapeutic approach in her teaching, meaning that what students ‘get’ out of the experience of making art is just as important as the end result. Group projects are also an opportunity for students to work on their communication and problem-solving skills, and to be flexible when things go wrong. And individual exploration within the context of a group project—like personalized pig designs—allows students to follow their own imaginations while still remaining part of a group.

Whether her students are painting stained-glass inspired pictures, crafting pigs for Chinese New Year, creating tissue paper winter trees in silhouette, or mixing custom colors for a recent cupcake-decorating challenge, the art educator in Libby wants to make sure that they are also learning about art. “I want them to learn as much as they can and to have fun at the same time. That’s my goal.” ■



SITE 2 MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS AT WORK ON A BLACK LIGHT ART PROJECT.



# Valley Elementary: STEM on Display

In a traditional science fair, students do much of the work on their own at home. Valley Elementary's first-ever Science and Art Fair took a very different approach, explains science and STEM teacher Emily Gilstrap. "We collaborated throughout the school to make sure that every student had the necessary support in order to be able to participate." And that's exactly what happened. "Of our 70 students, everyone participated in some way," says Emily.

Whole classes engaged in hands-on projects. Some students also did their own independent projects at home, further developing their individual interests. Everyone had an opportunity to present and show off their hard work for the rest of the school and the extended Valley community, including families and friends.

Early learners fashioned small "earths" out of Play-Doh, each of the planet's layer represented by a different color. Fourth and fifth grade students in Valley's intensive special needs classroom produced a two-scale model of the solar system using papier-mâché and clay, depending upon the size of the planet.

First and second-grade students dissected owl pellets, which as they found, contained rodent bones. They showed off their findings at the fair via a poster, and they weren't the only ones who were dazzled by the discovery. Their exhibit was awarded top honors by the fair's attendees, including teachers, parents and other members of the extended Valley community.

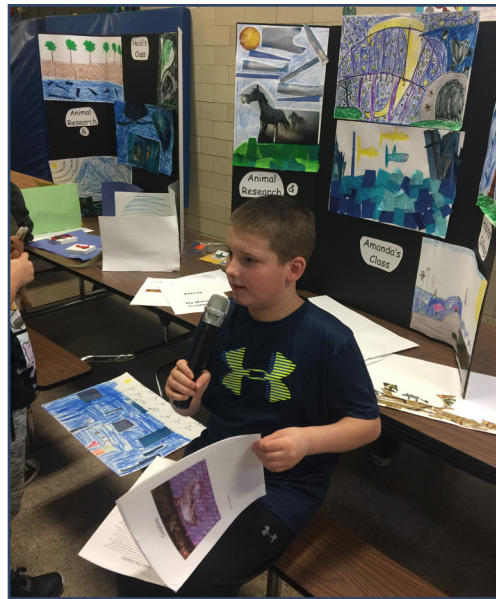
There was also plenty of art, because as Emily notes, "art and science go hand in hand." Students doing animal research worked on habitat collages with art teacher Libby DeBoalt. Students who've been using

Bloxels to design their own video games had a chance to show off their understanding of electronic arts.

"It was a huge success," says Emily. "We had a great turnout, everybody voted — and students got to take their projects home." If you missed it, not to worry. Valley Elementary's first-ever Science and Art Fair was such a hit that Emily and her colleagues plan to make this an annual event. ■

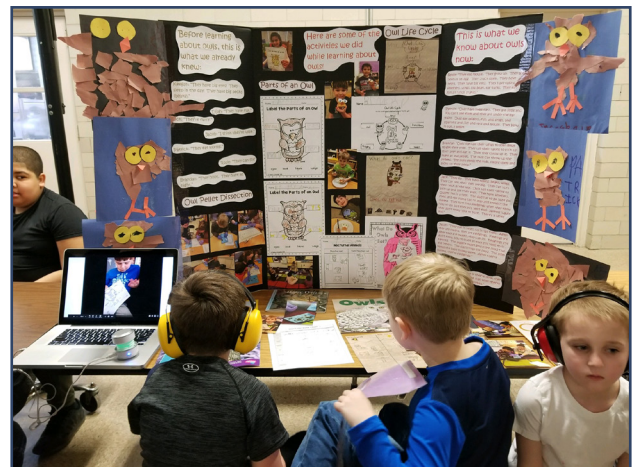


STUDENTS IN GINA DITOMMASO'S 1-3 GRADE CLASS SHOW OFF THE VIDEO GAMES THEY DESIGNED USING BLOXELS.



ERIC NABYDOWSKI PRESENTING HIS DOLPHIN PROJECT. IN ADDITION TO CLASS PROJECTS, STUDENTS HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO PURSUE THEIR OWN RESEARCH INTERESTS.

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# Middle School Site 2: A Positive Place To Be

Cavin Dunn-Benson, an eighth grade student at Valley's Site 2 Middle School, is looking forward to Friday. That's because the end of the week is also an opportunity for Cavin and the other 16 middle school students to celebrate their good work in the classroom with a much-deserved field trip. Students who meet expectations regarding behavior Monday thru Thursday head out into the community on Friday. "They've demonstrated that they're trustworthy enough to go on a trip," says Assistant Principal Glen Costello.

Students get to pick from several different trip options tailored to reflect a broad range of interests. One recent Friday found a group headed into Boston to an indoor sporting facility to play capture the flag; another group went to a make-your-own-pottery studio to get creative.

Cavin joined the sports enthusiasts. "Since it's winter and we're inside all of the time I prefer to get out and run." He says that the prospect of getting to go on an adventure gives him something to look forward to and helps him stay focused during the week. "It's a good incentive."

Jill Morton, also an eighth grade student, went to the pottery studio. "You have to get a certain number of points to earn the trip," she explains.

So far this year the students have gone to Purgatory Chasm State Reservation in Sutton, Mount Wachusett, Beverly's Endicott Park and Harold Parker State Forest where they had an opportunity to practice survival skills, including constructing a shelter out of forest debris. Another off-the-beaten-track destination: the Pepper Palace at Faneuil Hall, where they got to meet the owner and learn about the store's spicy offerings. "He was interesting to talk to," says

Cavin.

The idea of having students earn their way to a reward is one that Valley's Site 2 High School has used successfully for several years. Now Glen and his staff at the middle school are implementing the same approach with seventh and eighth grade students. Glen says that building strong relationships between Valley students and the teachers and staff who work with them has been key to the program's effectiveness. "There's a positivity about the place—you can feel it," says Glen.

Tyler Nelson has worked with the middle school for the last five years as a behavior aide and has extensive experience working in the mental health field. He says that facilitating trust between students and staff is essential when working in a middle school setting. "Our middle school students need a lot of guidance but they're also craving a lot of independence," says Tyler.

For these Site 2 students, the positive behavior incentive program



SHANE BROOKE TAKING A SNOWBOARDING LESSON AT WACHUSETT MOUNTAIN.

offers direction and room to move. And the end of the week brings yet another chance to leave the classroom behind and get out into the world. ■



JAYDEN CANALES BUILDING A FIRE DURING AN OUTDOOR EDUCATION FIELD TRIP TO HAROLD PARKER STATE FOREST.

# Site 3 Middle School: Future Focused

For students attending the Site 3 Middle School, the move to high school can be a momentous occasion, not to mention a little scary. That's why Site 3 teachers and staff decided that it was time to take some of the mystery out of the transition to ninth grade. Explains Principal Nicole Noska: "The students used to be really separate, and middle schoolers didn't really see high schoolers. We've tried to change that by creating clear pathways so that students can see where they're headed next."

During the 2018-2019 school year, the middle and high school programs have been collaborating on social activities and field trips. Whereas in the past eighth graders might have paid a visit to a high school classroom, the new emphasis is on a much more natural transition, allowing the middle schoolers to get to know some of their high-school counterparts. "They see for themselves that the high schoolers have more independence," says Nicole. "That gives them something to look forward to and work towards."

Valley Social worker Jen Schultz Bray says that the idea of getting the

students together came in response to a challenge: four students in a Site 3 social/pragmatic classroom were in need of more social interaction. Jen approached John Shea, a teacher who works with ninth and tenth graders. "The younger students needed some positive role models. Seeing the older students interact with each other, and with their teachers and staff provided that," says Jen.

The initial experiment was a success. Social activities including movie day and birthday parties, have sparked some friendships and have broadened the younger students' perspectives on life and school. The new middle school/high school group has also had opportunities to interact outside of school. In recent months the students have taken field trips to see the U.S.S. Constitution and to play laser tag. Supported by Valley staffers including social workers, speech therapists and classroom teachers, the students have visited Chip-In Farm in Bedford and stepped out onto the ice at Edge Ice Arena.

Gym teacher Micaelagh Campbell arranged a trip to CKS Training, where students enjoyed an hour-long high intensity workout with the facility's owner. "They got to learn new skills all while having fun," says Micaelagh. Joining the group of Site 3 high school students was middle schooler Adam Conant. "I was so impressed with how well he did on this trip being the only middle school student," says Micaelagh. "He was a rock star!"

"The trips have allowed the students to get to know one another in a less formal setting, and some new bonds have definitely formed," says Jen. During a recent trip to a trampoline park, a middle schooler and a high schooler discovered that they shared a love and a skill for dodge-



ADAM CONANT WORKS ON HIS BOXING SKILLS AT CKS TRAINING.

ball. The field trips and other social events are about more than just having a good time, explains Jen. "The younger students get role models at a time when they really need them. They really seemed to recognize that the older students have more self control, and they look at their own behavior as a result."

As for the high schoolers, they've appreciated the opportunity for additional social interaction and the chance to mentor and model good behavior for their younger peers. As Jen explains: "When I talked to them about this I told them that I wanted the middle school students to see how great you are and learn from you."

Next year, many of the middle schoolers will be joining or taking the place of their older peers in the Site 3 Alternative High School or Transitional High School. Thanks to some creative thinking by Valley staff that transition will be a lot less scary.

"It's going to feel more natural this year than ever before," says Nicole. "They've had so many more opportunities to engage and really see for themselves what the future looks like." ■



KAYLEIGH TATROE WITH A FURRY FRIEND ON A COMBINED CLASS TRIP TO CHIP-IN FARM.



# Adult Services: Striving for Independence

The staff at Valley's Today and Tomorrow program began the year with an ambitious goal: to dramatically increase the number of Individuals who are independently employed. Since July, 13 more Individuals have found jobs, bringing to 27 the number who are now working independently at a range of job sites across the region.

The push to expand employment opportunities is part of a larger overhaul of the program that began two years ago. Today and Tomorrow has expanded its emphasis on job skills training, starting with helping the 93 Individuals who are currently in the program identify job areas that interest them. There's also a more systematic approach to providing the kinds of support needed to develop job readiness. Today and Tomorrow staff help with resume writing, role playing job-related skills, and provide guidance on how to behave in the workplace.

The process is also highly-tailored to the Individuals in the program. Once their specific skills and interests are identified, Individuals

have the opportunity to see what a worksite is like. Someone with an interest in office work, for example, might try a stint at Billerica Town Hall. Individuals who are interested in pursuing kitchen work might be paired with Joe Reilly of Joe's Bistro to learn some skills before they move onto the next level. Once a match has been made, Valley's five job developers work to come up with a schedule that combines work with career planning. All of that support and attention to detail is paying off for the Individuals in the program. Ninety percent are currently employed, either individually or as part of a group, and earning the minimum wage or more.

## Support Team

The list of job sites where Today and Tomorrow participants are currently employed includes 3M, Lantheus Medical Imaging, Billerica Town Hall, Bristol Meyers Squibb, CVS, Petco, TJ Maxx, Stop and Shop, Outback Steakhouse, and various other local restaurants and grocery stores. Valley job developers are always on the lookout for new potential employers. "When I see that somebody's got a job opening, the first question I ask is 'who would that be good for?'" says Darren Goad. "Our goal is to get the Individuals we serve recognized as a real asset for employers."

Making a job match is only part of the equation. The job developers also offer whatever assistance is needed in order to help the Individuals work independently, keeping a running assessment of who is doing well and who needs additional support. The Individuals typically receive more support at first, less as they grow more comfortable working independently. "We provide the kind of support that can help turn a job into a career," explains job developer



CRYSTAL D. ON THE JOB AT WEGMANS.

Pam McNulty, noting that some of the Individuals in the program have held the same jobs for a decade or more.

The job developers also make a point of stopping by various worksites to see how things are going, and check in with managers regularly. "If there's a problem, we can work together to try to fix it," says Pam. "That little bit of extra support can make all the difference."

The Outback Steakhouse in Lowell, where Samantha W. has worked for the past year as a Kitchen Assistant, portioning and weighing food items before they are served to patrons, is one of Pam's regular stops. When Samantha first started at Outback she needed some help navigating the responsibilities of her new job, including figuring out how to use the time clock. Pam worked with Outback managers to find a solution, and these days Samantha needs less support.

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DONALD B. AT WORK AT CINTAS.

# A School-to-Work Success Story

**C**ole Nardone has some advice for Valley students: don't get discouraged when things get hard. "Ask for help when you need it," says Cole, who recently started a new job in the IT department at MACOM Technology Solutions in Lowell.

Cole has always loved technology but his experiences at Valley helped him transform a passion into a career. He started out as a student at Valley's former school in Pepperell before transitioning into the School-to-Work program. A job at Bristol Myers Squibb delivering mail gave him his first taste of the routines of a big workplace; a stint at a veterinary clinic taught him his limits. "That was a little too traumatic," Cole recalls.

But it was his work with Valley's technology department that helped Cole figure out his true calling. He interned for a year and a half before joining the staff as a full-time technician, providing tech support and troubleshooting expertise to Valley staff. "He was an essential part of the team," says Angel Cartagena, Valley's Senior IT Technician.

The tech part of his job came easy, says Cole. "I love to tinker with computers. I started out with my family's PC." Navigating the workplace, though, with its often unspoken rules, was a bigger challenge. For assistance, Cole relied on Sean Curran, a job development coach



COLE NARDONE ATTENDED VALLEY'S SCHOOL-TO-WORK PROGRAM AND HAS JUST STARTED A JOB AT AN IT COMPANY.

at Valley, calling upon him whenever he needed advice about how to handle a situation at work.

"Cole's tech skills are unbelievable," says Sean. "He just needed to develop confidence and gain an understanding that people have different styles at work and that not everyone is a tech expert." In the course of his time in Valley's tech department, Cole made considerable progress, says Sean. "We've seen so much growth in him."

Sean and the other job development coaches, including Darren Goad and Pam McNulty, say that as proud as they are of Cole, it wasn't easy to see him move on. "We've become extremely close. We're like a family," says Sean. Cole plans to stay in touch from his new job, and if he needs help, his old friends at Valley will be on hand to offer support, assistance and advice. They may even call upon him with the occasional tech question. "I'm horrendous at tech," says Sean. "I miss Cole already."

So how are things going at Cole's new job? "He loves it," says Richard Infante, Valley's junior IT technician. "He just called us to tell us about a big new project he's working on." ■

## Striving for Independence

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"My goal is to be the very best that I can be," says Samantha.

In the event that a job doesn't work out, the job developers also want to make sure that they understand why, even sitting in on exit interviews to make sure that parting goes smoothly. "We try to end it with grace. You want to keep the door open," says Darren. Understanding what went wrong helps the job developers determine what kind of training and support is required to make the Individual's next job a success.

### Building Independence

Until recently, the job developers worked separately based on the funding source that supported their work. These days they are increasingly working together, sharing leads on potential jobs and

partnerships with local businesses. "We have a team of people—it's a village," says Darren.

A more unified structure isn't the only change at Today and Tomorrow. Last year, the program expanded its recreational offerings, specifically targeting Individuals who reside in group homes. Explains Adult Services Manager Joe Venskus: "They don't always have the opportunity to get out because transportation is such an issue, so we're providing that."

While the Today and Tomorrow staff members are still working on reaching the goal of finding independent employment for 25 more Individuals this year, they are on their way, says Joe. "Our goal is to help the people we serve live and work independently and we're building, building, building to get there." ■

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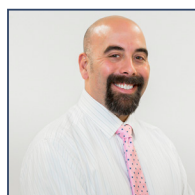
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