KENNEBUNKPORT CONSERVATION TRUST

Last Chance for an Education

What happens when at-risk teens build a trail for their community?

There was no way Joe Cerrone was going to graduate, at least from the looks of things his junior year. “I wasn’t really about sitting in the classroom and listening to someone lecture you,” he says.

Joe arrived at a nature preserve owned by the Kennebunkport Conservation Trust in Maine in 2012, as part of an alternative education program for high schoolers who weren’t thriving in mainstream classrooms. There were 14 boys, recalls Leia Lowery, the trust’s director of education. They didn’t know each other well and they weren’t used to spending their days outdoors. They didn’t like coming out in any weather, on cold and wet days as well as pleasant ones. They kept their hoodies up and their headphones in. “I joked that they hated school, they hated belts—they hated everything other than their phones,” Leia says.

The trust had been partnering with local schools for years, bringing elementary students to their preserves—but this was something new. The alternative education, or “alt ed,” students weren’t just here to visit. They came to build something.

Two students, David Jackson (left) and Harry Fay (right) discover a red eft salamander.

Students build a boardwalk across a wet area of the trail.

NEED FOR CONNECTION

The alt ed program at Kennebunk High School gave these teenagers a chance to try hands-on learning—possibly their last chance at an education before they got in trouble or dropped out. On the preserve, their project was to create a 1-mile loop trail with interpretive signs, called The Learning Trail. They could learn science as they got to know the forest. They could learn math by measuring wood for boardwalks and bridges. They could learn research and writing as they prepared the signs. They could learn history as they came across fire scars or a forgotten graveyard. Even
more important, says teacher Ed Sharood, they could learn to connect. “These kids are kind of disenfranchised,” Ed says. “They don’t have much of a support system. They go home to maybe a parent, maybe no parent, maybe no house. Some of them might ‘couch-surf’ for a few months here and there. There are issues with food. So we try to get them re-engaged.”

Outside of school, the kids spent much of their time absorbed in screens—TV, video games, social media. Working outdoors allowed them to discover their love for nature. Ed recalls one student who said that time in the woods was calming. “Within 10 minutes of getting the rake and getting on the trail, he could feel that sense of stress, of not having a connection, easing. He felt connected to the land and to the trees and he wanted to know what’s going on with the paper wasps’ nest and what’s going on with the beaver dam and if we’re going to find anything new today.”

After a few months, Leia began to notice a difference. “They were getting into it,” she says. “They had smiles on their faces. They were connected to each other. They couldn’t wait to get out on the trail and work.” One afternoon a group of boys ran up, clamoring for her to come see what they’d done. They took her to a stream crossing where they’d thought they would need to build a bridge. Instead, the teens had created a rock walkway. “They totally problem-solved it,” Leia says. “To me, it was a real turning point. They were taking ownership. They were taking pride in their work.”

**WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?**

“At first, the kids were like, ‘What is this? What are we doing here?’” Ed recalls. “They didn’t have the wherewithal to see the vision of what they were creating.”

The Learning Trail was completed in 2013 on a preserve next to the trust’s headquarters. Open to the public, it offers a beautiful walk in the woods, with signs about features like the Batson River, wetlands, vernal pools, beavers, birds and an old logging road. Elementary students take field trips there. Families come for walks. People run with their dogs or snowshoe in the winter.

Ed says the project showed the teenagers “that they have a role here as a member in the community, where I don’t think they really had that before.”

Alyssa Palmer, a student in a science class that also worked on the trail, says, “What I like about the trust is that it can be used by younger kids.

“[It has expanded from simply conserving land to using the land that the community helped us conserve to build a stronger community.]”

— Leia Lowery

“I probably wouldn’t have graduated if it wasn’t for the program and the trail and Mr. Sharood being a good teacher.”

— Joe Cerrone
The cool thing is we were a part of it. We made something in our town that can benefit everyone.”

Another student, Dwight Philbrick, says, “We created a learning trail so kids will grow up and learn how amazing things are in our own backyard. Kids now are all about staying in with their technology. We need to teach them that outside is better, healthier and more fun.”

The idea that this land will be protected forever is especially powerful for his students, Ed says. “They’ve bought into that vision that this is something I can be proud of; this is something I can show my family and my friends; and it’s something that’s always going to be here. Their lives are completely chaotic and the trust is very constant. They really buy into the fact that this is going to be here forever; this is going to be here for my kids and the generations.”

**CHANGING LIVES**

That first project led to a committed partnership between the land trust and the alt ed program. Now students are working on a Storybook Trail; a nature play area may be next. These projects exemplify the trust’s evolving sense of purpose, Leia says. “It has expanded from simply conserving land to using the land that the community helped us conserve to build a stronger community.”

While they can’t turn things around for all of the students, Leia says, many of them do go on to finish school. To celebrate, the alt ed program holds a special graduation ceremony each year at the trust’s headquarters.

Today, Joe Cerrone is 19 years old. He has his diploma. He’s working, making decent wages, saving money and exploring further career training. He goes out to the trail a few days a week to run with his Husky.

“I probably wouldn’t have graduated if it wasn’t for the program and the trail and Mr. Sharood being a good teacher,” Joe says. “Before, I was kind of like just bumming around, doing dumb stuff like smoking pot with all my friends, pretty much going nowhere fast. But I learned how to develop a better work ethic, having to get up and get all our supplies ready and be out in the cold. You have to bite it and do it. It’s definitely more motivating than just sitting in a classroom.”