

# Harvard teens, JUMP wants you

by Verity Sayles · Friday, June 6, 2014

If you were to buy supplies for a day of hiking in the White Mountains, you might think first of hiking boots, rain gear, a backpack, water, and snacks. For Ayer Road resident Bill Spacciapoli, founder of Just Understand My Potential (JUMP), a nonprofit organization that takes underserved youth into the mountains, it's a little more complicated.

JUMP was incorporated as a nonprofit in 2005. In 2010 Spacciapoli partnered with the Boys & Girls Club of Fitchburg and Leominster and began meeting potential hikers in larger numbers. In talking with interested participants, he realized, "What they need first, and most, is a history of their vaccinations, a doctor's signature, and money for that copay; they need shorts (those that own synthetic basketball shorts wear them to games), and they need to eat. Kids come from all kinds of circumstances and they are not necessarily going to tell you what those are, but a lot of those kids are hungry," he says.

## **Taking underserved youths into the mountains**

Grants, awards, donations, and a large number of volunteers have allowed Spacciapoli to take underserved youths on two-day hiking trips in the White Mountains, free of charge. Transportation and food are provided, and trained volunteers lead groups of up to eight students. After a long day of hiking, JUMP participants typically stay in AMC (Appalachian Mountain Club) huts or lodges, where dinner, bunks, and breakfast are provided. "I have kids who didn't even know the White Mountains existed, or who fend for themselves for dinner because they have a working single parent. You don't take a kid like that and have him sleep under a tarp, or he'll never come back."

The AMC huts cost from \$120 to \$140 a night, which, Spacciapoli admits, is not an inexpensive proposition. But, he says, "The beauty of backpacking is that the outdoors can care less about how much

your boots cost. When it rains everyone gets wet, regardless of how much your raincoat costs. The skill comes in whether you can stay warm and hydrated and ambulatory.” Facing the elements, climbing steep cliff faces, and enduring long days and sore feet is a team effort and requires communication and responsibility. Jon Blodgett, teen director at the Boys & Girls Club of Fitchburg and Leominster says, “After teens return from the hikes, they are more willing to take on responsibility and leadership roles at the club.”

### **From those who have, more is expected**

The skills fostered by a multi-day hiking trip are applicable to all teenagers, regardless of background. Spacciapoli is now reaching out to interested teenagers in Harvard and hopes they can become better future leaders by being participants in his program. “Youth in Harvard have more opportunity, but society requires them to work as hard as their less affluent peers,” Spacciapoli says. “They have a social responsibility; they have more, so more is expected.” He says he wants to share his passion for the outdoors and his knowledge of survival skills to prepare young people for lifelong challenges. “Some of those kids are going to go on to great things, and I would like to be able to influence that,” he says.

As high school students look for ways to differentiate themselves during the college application process, JUMP offers such an opportunity. “You can’t help but turn into a responsible young man or woman,” says Spacciapoli. “But when you’re out there and the going gets tough, you aren’t going to pull through because it will look good on your college applications; it’s because people are counting on you.”

Spacciapoli is offering his Compass Rose curriculum for students ages 11 to 16 in which they will learn wilderness first aid training, go on multi-day hikes, develop leadership skills, and form lifelong relationships. “This isn’t about a few hikes,” he says. “If they want to succeed, there is a place for them. This isn’t sitting at a desk; it’s a way of interacting with the world that will serve them beyond their engagement with JUMP.”

Interested teenagers and parents can find more information at <http://www.jumpinc.org/index.html> or by calling 978-621-7286 or emailing [director@jumpinc.org](mailto:director@jumpinc.org).