

Loading packs for adventure

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LEOMINSTER -- **Angela Salazar** slipped a backpack onto her shoulders with a smile and started talking about a hike she is taking in the White Mountains this weekend.

Next to her, John Rodriguez and Tim Acosta also picked up empty packs.

They will be part of a small group from the Boys & Girls Club of Fitchburg and Leominster hiking in the White Mountains with the nonprofit group Just Understand My Potential.

Each hiker is responsible for packing personal gear they need for the trip.

Harvard-based JUMP provides backpacks, hiking shoes, food, transportation and other equipment to get the kids out on the trail.

The hikers are not allowed to bring any electronics such as iPods or cellphones, said Teen Center Director Jon Blodgett.

JUMP Executive Director Bill Spacciapoli approached the club about three years ago offering to partner with it for the program, Blodgett said.

The club helps find young people to participate and provides adult volunteers to chaperone.

Spacciapoli is a mechanical engineer for Lincoln Laboratories who lives in Harvard and started JUMP in 2007 as a way to help children.

"That is the focus, to give these kids a chance to raise their expectations and see what is possible for them," he said.

He has a core group of about eight volunteers with JUMP who plan outings such as this weekend's for weeks or months.

JUMP started slowly until developing a partnership with the club in 2010.

Blodgett, the club's caretaker Chris Melvin, and a teenager at the club joined about three JUMP volunteers recently for a 16-hour Wilderness First Aid training workshop taught by Solo Wilderness Medicine in Conway, N.H.

"It is really a good training," said Spacciapoli, who is an EMT.

This weekend's trip will be the club's third this summer. Members will leave Friday afternoon and return Sunday afternoon.

They will sleep in huts provided by the Appalachian Mountain Club or under tarps, Blodgett said.

"It's fun, but there's a level of seriousness that comes along with these hikes," he said.

The hiking program fits the Boys & Girls Club's mission to help young people grow into well-rounded adults, said Executive Director Donata Martin.

They learn to be stewards of the environment, learn some science and get some exercise, she said.

"It gives the children a chance to be in the outdoors for an extended period of time, which in many cases they have fear of doing," she said. "Spending overnight in the woods is something that's new for them."

The teenagers all seem to have their own reasons for taking part.

Salazar, 14, is going into ninth grade at Fitchburg High School.

This is her first year in the program, and she likes the opportunity it gives her to get out of the city.

The program also gives opportunities to take responsibility, Salazar said.

Rodriguez, 16, is a 10th-grader at Fitchburg High and has gone on one hike so far.

He said the hikes give him time to hang out with friends, talk and joke.

"The first hike I went on, I got to spend time with my good buddies, and we were cracking jokes the whole time," Rodriguez said.

The hikes get progressively more difficult, Blodgett said.

Salazar's first hike was only a mile or two long, but she got a blister and Rodriguez teased her that she slowed the group down.

Acosta, 16, is an 11th-grader at Fitchburg High. He has gone on hikes June 1 and June 22, but is skipping this weekend to spend time with his sister, Gabby Piro, who is turning 10.

Acosta said he likes the exercise from hiking.

"I think it's really good exercise and gets me out of town," Acosta said.