

Soaring to greater heights

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After three successful years working with the Boys & Girls Club of Fitchburg and Leominster, **JustUnderstand My Potential** (JUMP) is now reaching out to Harvard youth who want to gain wilderness training and leadership skills through guiding sight-impaired hikers.

JUMP is an outdoor experiential education program that started as the vision of Bill Spacciapoli in 2005 and was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 2007. Spacciapoli, a member of the Appalachian Mountain Club and former member of the Harvard Board of Health, said he started the program to help give all kids the same opportunities to succeed.

The organization owns a room full of hiking and camping equipment housed in Spacciapoli's Harvard basement. On weekends during the summer and fall, JUMP takes groups of kids on hiking trips to the White Mountains in New Hampshire where teens develop leadership skills while learning how to read maps and compasses and survive outdoors.

"Most of these kids [participating] have never been on a hike of that type," said Spacciapoli. "They're learning how to take care of themselves."

Last year, Spacciapoli contacted the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) and they expressed interest in sending groups of sight-impaired hikers on trips. Last year, JUMP hosted an intern, Adam Greene, from the commission. Greene, who is classified with low received a 16-hour course and certification in Wilderness First Aid/CPR to participate on hikes as a leader.

Spacciapoli said interested Harvard youths would pay a small fee, approximately \$100, to receive training and gain leadership skills and experience in working with disabled hikers.

"I want to really engage some of the youth from Harvard," said Spacciapoli. "The current plan is; I have the GPS [talking global positioning system] which the Harvard Lions funded a grant to buy, I have the money for the insurance for the program and now we're reaching out to the [Harvard] school system to start."

Spacciapoli said the goal of the program is to guide sight-impaired hikers in a foreign environment while helping them gain navigation skills and a sense of independence.

"In an urban setting, it can be important to look at somebody and know right away that they're sight impaired," said Spacciapoli. "On a hiking trail when they're with people in a group that are aware and **understand**, there's no driving need for anyone else you pass on the trail to know.

"I'm hoping [the program will begin] in the fall," said Spacciapoli about the partnership with the commission. "We'll keep at it. It's going to work."

As of press time, the commission was not available for comment.

In the meantime, JUMP continues to partner with the Boys & Girls Club. A group from the club hiked from the Highland Center in June and another group left on July 20 for the last summer hike.

Jon Blodgett, the Teen Center director at the Boys & Girls Club, has worked with JUMP since the partnership began and has participated in a number of hikes. Blodgett said he has noticed an increase in attendance at the club and at school as well as improved academics in teens that have participated. Blodgett said after teens return from the hikes, they are more willing to take on responsibility and leadership roles within the club and have taken a more active interest in physical fitness. "It's been great for our kids," said Blodgett. "Seeing them out of their element is special. They've developed teamwork and leadership skills."

Clever Chaves, 17, from Fitchburg went on the first hike with the Boys & Girls Club and has since participated four more times and become Wilderness First Aid and CPR certified. He said he enjoys the freedom of being away from home while hiking with friends in the fresh air.

"I want to be a surgeon, so it's really helped," said Chaves. "[I've] developed **my** teamwork, made new friends, learned about being out in the wilderness and it will look good on **my** resume."

Timothy Acosta, 16, has also been on a number of hikes. He said he enjoys being outdoors and spending time with peers and staff from the Boys & Girls Club. When asked how he felt about the organizations 'no electronics' policy, he said he found it hard at first, but he would rather be outdoors exploring than texting all day.

"[It's] a really good experience," said Acosta. "I'm glad I found JUMP."

Sydney Durand, left, and Leanne MacDonald pose for a picture. MacDonald is a sight-impaired hiker who has participated with JUMP independently since 2011. COURTESY PHOTO.

Chris Melvin, right, a staff member at the Boys & Girls Club of Fitchburg and Leominster and Clever Chaves help Neyda Maldondo cross a stream. COURTESY PHOTO.

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