

# J.U.M.P. programs help level the playing field

**By Dave Greenslit CORRESPONDENT**

Back in August, Clever Chaves was stressing out about college, not sure if he could afford to go.

But for the past four years, the Fitchburg resident has participated in a program called Just Understand My Potential, and someone has done just that. An anonymous donor is paying for Chaves to attend Fitchburg State University and, if Chaves stays focused and committed, graduate school, as well.

"He could see from the way I've talked about Clever that he would be a good investment, to give him a chance. He wanted to level the playing field for him," Bill Spacciapoli, the founder and executive director of J.U.M.P., said of the donor.

Though he didn't foresee college funding coming, leveling the playing field for underserved minority kids is what Spacciapoli had in mind when he founded J.U.M.P., the nonprofit organization he put into operation in 2010.

His idea was to introduce youths to the outdoors through hiking and backpacking and, in the process, get them on a path to becoming accountable and responsible.

"Backpacking is a great way to learn that," Spacciapoli said in an interview at Fitchburg State. "Nature imposes it on you."

Spacciapoli, who lives in Harvard and holds engineering degrees from Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Virginia Tech, said he conceived of J.U.M.P. in 2005, as his own children were getting older and he was looking to help kids who may not have the structure or financial support at home to help them succeed.

J.U.M.P. participants learn the basics of hiking and backpacking, including the use of map and compass, camping, cooking, first aid and leave-no-trace principles to protect the environment. Spacciapoli and 15 to 20 other trained volunteers lead the trips, on which the youths might take turns leading segments of the hikes.

Mentoring is also part of the program, with volunteers, many of them professional people, serving as role models. Spacciapoli said volunteers need wilderness first aid, CPR and other training, but find the commitment is worth the effort. "It's really rewarding to hear the leaders talk about how much they get out of it," he said.

The Boys & Girls Club of Fitchburg and Leominster channels kids into J.U.M.P., and the Appalachian Mountain Club, through its Youth Opportunities Program, provides training, outdoor gear and lodging at its facilities in the White Mountains and elsewhere, according to Spacciapoli.

While some J.U.M.P. participants try the program and don't come back, others, like Chaves,

continue to return. "I like to think of it as matching their commitment," Spacciapoli said of the volunteers' effort.

Chaves said he spent afternoons for many years at the Boys & Girls Club while his mother worked, and got into J.U.M.P. at the suggestion of the director of the club's teen center. He's done lots of hiking, is certified in wilderness first aid, advanced wilderness first aid and CPR, and has taken a land navigation course involving trigonometry. By summer, he hopes to be a co-leader on some of J.U.M.P.'s hiking and backpacking trips.

His favorite outings have been hikes in New Hampshire to AMC's Mizpah Hut, in the Crawford Notch area of the White Mountains, and to Lonesome Lake, near Franconia Notch, a nice place to swim with a beautiful view of the peaks that make up Franconia Ridge.

Chaves is doing well in his first semester at Fitchburg State, where he is studying biology, and he hopes to go to medical school, which Spacciapoli said the anonymous donor is also willing to fund.

About 50 youths have gone through J.U.M.P., and Spacciapoli said he's just finding out what becomes of them. He recently ran into one participant who told him he was working toward becoming a firefighter and emergency medical technician.

Now that a donor has come forward to pay for Chaves' education, Spacciapoli is hoping to build on that, with others contributing to a scholarship fund for J.U.M.P. participants.

In remarks prepared for the Worcester AMC chapter's annual meeting, when Chaves was introduced as J.U.M.P.'s first Summit Scholar, Spacciapoli noted that many youths don't have the structure at home to push them through high school, advocate for them or even help them with college applications or appointments. For those kids, he said, college can be "a bridge too far."

Sitting next to Chaves at Fitchburg State, he said that through his work with J.U.M.P., "I've learned a lot about just how different it is for these kids."