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Outing clubs get boost from teen grant program

By Amy Anderson (published: December 04, 2008)

YARMOUTH – In an effort to encourage teens to spend less time in front of the television and more time exploring the outdoors, eight high schools across the state were awarded the first Teens to Trails grant to create and support Outing clubs.



Brunswick, Yarmouth and Portland’s Deering high schools were among the grant recipients. The others were East Grand School, Fort Kent Community High School, Maine School for Science and Mathematics in Limestone, Monmouth Academy and Thornton Academy in Saco.

Teens to Trails, or T3, was founded by Bob and Carol Leone, Wiscasset parents whose 15-year-old daughter Sara died in a car accident in 2005.

Sara was active in her high school Outing Club and spent a lot of time with her parents and sister kayaking, skiing, camping and hiking.

On the T3 Web site, the Leones say they are committed to dedicating the efforts of the Teens to Trails initiative “to Sara and all those special people who care enough to help teens connect with their surroundings.”

Deering High School students Samantha Burns, left, and Jason Barton snoeshoe at Pleasant Mountain last March. Burns founded the school’s Outing Club and recently received a Teens to Trails grant to help support the club.

Courtesy Madeline Burns

“Our goal is to get all high schools in the state to create an active Outing Club,” Carol Leone said in an interview. “We decided early on to focus our energy on teens. While it is necessary to get everyone outside, teens are a particularly important group.”

She said research shows that teens who participate in positive outdoor experiences can combat the trend to experience depression, suicide or obesity. She also said being outdoors with their peers gives teens self-confidence and leadership skills.

“Kids have grown scared of the outdoors,” she said. “They are not comfortable in the woods because it is just not on their radar.”

She said the goal of T3 is to give teens the tools they need to be confident in the woods. The T3 grant was originally meant to benefit three to five Outing Clubs, but Leone found eight to support.

She said the grant money and supplies provided by L.L. Bean and the Horizon Foundation would be used for new gear and equipment, transportation, fees for

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hiring registered Maine guides, public use and recreational fees, and safety and skills training. The money would also allow outdoor activities to be offered to students who may not have had the resources to participate.

Leone said she received 15 applications, two of which came from middle schools. She said it was a difficult decision to make, but said it felt good to help those that she could.

"When students get behind the program, it really takes off," Leone said. "They have a spark and a purpose different from teachers, advisors and parents."

Bringing people together

At Deering High School, senior Samantha Burns created the school's first Outing Club and applied for the T3 grant. She is the club's founder and president.

"I love the outdoors and wanted to share that with my peers," Burns said. "Deering is a big school and it is a good way to make friends and be active."

She said with the help of her Math teacher and principal, she completed the necessary paperwork and waivers and formed the club.

She said the students who participate in the club have a mix of abilities. Some students have only walked in the woods and others are avid hikers and skiers.

"We all learn a lot from each other," she said. "This definitely brings people together."

The Outing Club is also new at Yarmouth High School and was prompted by the actions of sophomore Carley Westerfield.

Catie Wooten, a physical science and biology teacher, said Westerfield wrote the T3 grant for the school.

"Receiving this grant was a really good start-up for us," she said. "We will use the funds for transportation and to help make the trips more affordable for the members."

She said the 25 members try to meet once a week, and have gone on one trip this year. She said the students are planning future trips and ways to raise money for the club.

"We asked for and received \$500," Wooten said. "It is exciting to get started."

The Outing Club at Brunswick High School has been active since 1993, and has grown in ability and interest since then.

Outing Club advisors, science teacher Emily Jacesko and special education instructor Sue Loyd, applied for the T3 grant and received five daypacks from L.L. Bean.

Loyd has been part of the Outing Club since the beginning and said she has had the opportunity to watch students blossom as they gain more confidence outdoors.

"We are lucky to be able to share the time that we do with them outside," she said. "It is so different than time spent in the classroom."

Loyd said she sees the positive benefits of the Outing Club in the students who have little to no experience. She said regardless of their friendships in school, members of the club bond.

"They learn responsibility, they lead a group, they look after each other," she said.

Jacesko said the daypacks from Bean will be a huge help to the group.

"For us it has been fun," she said. "We hope this program will continue, and be used to inspire more high schools to start outing clubs."

'Fabulous organization'

While T3 and the Grants-to-Clubs program will help start new outing clubs and assist existing clubs strengthen their programs and offerings, Leone said the program could not have been possible without the help of L.L. Bean and the Horizon Foundation.

Laurie Gilman in the L.L. Bean office of public affairs, said T3 is a "fabulous organization" she is thrilled to support.

With close to 225 requests a week, Gilman said it was a pleasure to offer assistance to a nonprofit with goals similar to the company's philosophy.

"The intention of our charitable giving is to focus on getting people into the outdoors," she said. "T3 has the ambitious goal of incorporating an Outing Club in every high school in the state."

Gilman said Bean supported T3 with grant money as well as backpacks and snowshoes.

She said she was also impressed with the teens who are a part of the school outing groups.

"The students involved don't just join the clubs to take easy outdoor hikes," she said. "They get their hands dirty and participate in trail construction, trail maintenance, and service projects."

The other partner of the Grants-to-Club program, the Horizon Foundation, supports nonprofit organizations that create positive changes and try to improve local communities. It helps protect and conserve land and water resources, educate children about environmental issues, respect historic assets and encourage service to others.

Alexander "Sandy" Buck, president of the Horizon Foundation, said he met Leone when they served on the governor's task force for "Take it Outside."

"Her story really gets your attention," he said. "Instead of folding up, she pushed through and created this opportunity for other teens in the state. They were inspired by their daughter and expanded their vision."

Buck said Horizon has been funding environmental education for 12 years and, like L.L. Bean, the T3 initiative fits the core of the Horizon Foundation very well.

"T3 is interesting because it touches on all aspects of environmental education," he said. "Focusing on the children and the leadership created is what we try to encourage and develop in teens."

Buck said children are missing out on the outdoor activities because of television and video games or their parents' fears of the outdoors.

"The idea of starting a vibrant outing club in every high school in the state is something that absolutely needs to happen," he said. "The more children are outdoors, the more they will care about Mother Nature. Hopefully, we can inspire them to become our future activists and they will fight for our environment."

Buck said Leone's passion will help her succeed in her effort to support outing clubs statewide.

"When you are that fired up, you are bound to make magic happen," he said. "We are compelled and committed to help in her endeavor."

Leone said she found there are many difficulties in making her dream a reality, but she would keep trying. She said transportation, the cost of gas, liability, safety, lack of necessary clothing and gear were some of the few hurdles in making outing clubs succeed.

She said some schools are slow to realize how critical it is for teens to be outdoors, but with communication and a lot of effort, outing clubs will receive the support and encouragement they need to succeed.

According to Burns, Deering's Outing Club has empowered students and started to build trust in the community.

"We live in Maine and need to take advantage of what we have," she said. "We need to plug out instead of plugging in."

Amy Anderson can be reached at 781-3661 ext. 110 or aanderson@theforecaster.net.

FYI: For more information on Teens to Trails, visit TeensToTrails.org.