

Sports > Outdoors-Recreation (/Sports/Outdoors-Recreation/)

On The Beaten Path: TSA's Trail Crew Embracing The Outdoors

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Sharon — Amid The Sharon Academy High School's 94 acres sits a mixed hardwood forest treasure surrounding the pristine White Brook. During the previous two semesters, students have been working to make it more accessible.

The focal point of the school's Trail Crew elective, a group of five students is putting the finishing touches on a mile-long loop trail that starts on the rear side of the main parking lot and meanders through the woods, along a defunct logging road and below a ridge line before completing at the athletic fields on the west end of campus.

With the assistance of the Upper Valley Trails Alliance and TSA teachers, work began last fall to carve out new sections of the trail and spruce up existing makeshift paths that led to a pre-existing outdoor classroom alongside the brook. Once finished, the trail will be open for public use — foot travel only — and be named for Jenepher Lingelbach, a former TSA Board member and environmentalist who died last June.

With widely varying terrain, TSA athletes hope it can be a home course for its cross country team and a cardiovascular training ground for all Phoenix teams. Plus, it's a great outlet for simply roaming.

Sharon senior Dillon Buttner is one of five students enrolled in the elective this semester.

"Sometimes, when I had a free period, I'd walk up to the logging road and back, just to get away and clear my mind. It's peaceful and kind of an escape," Buttner said. "It's so much better now that it's a loop, that it's longer and you don't have to turn around and come back the same way. I hope there will be more classes out here now and it will just get a lot more kids in the woods."

The area is already being more utilized, even drawing Sharon Elementary School students for five straight days last week as the destination for its “Week in the Woods” outdoor learning program. The aforementioned outdoor classroom is only about a five-minute walk from TSA’s main parking lot and features a circle of log benches next to the enticing White Brook, whose waters were supremely clear on Thursday.

“It’s beautiful out here,” said science teacher Rob Stainton, who led the course this spring with UVTA trail programs director Sean Ogle. “It’s so quiet; you would never guess you were so close to the school.”

Another group, led by Ogle and TSA math teacher Chad Behre, began the project last fall. Using logistics and their own intuition to carve out new portions of the trail, the group dug water bars to help prevent erosion as well as built a wooden bridge in one section.

Aidan Trimble, a senior, was in the initial class. “It was a lot of fun, working as a team to build the trail,” Trimble said. “The downhill slopes were a little hard to dig in. We wanted to make it wide enough, but not too steep. We also wanted to have minimal (environmental) impact because we know these woods are a habitat for a lot of species like foxes and deer.”

Buttner, senior Austin Potter, sophomore Lowry Newswanger and freshmen Olivia Swayze and Abby Gross did some additional digging and worked on details such as blazing and map designing this semester. On Thursday, they dug post holes and inserted a wooden kiosk to welcome hikers at the entrance to the trail.

It took all of their strength to get the structure in the holes, only to realize the posts needed to be truncated.

“Oh, right there, it says ‘ground level,’” Ogle pointed out, gesturing toward a marked line on a post they hadn’t previously noticed. “We’re going to have to cut it.”

Stainton measured the length from the ground to the line. “We’ll need to cut 22 inches off each leg,” he noted.

After some chainsaw work by Ogle, students reinserted the kiosk, steadying the base of the posts with gravel and dirt. They used a smartphone application to make sure it was level — Stainton called upon the group to adjust it slightly — and finished just in time for the scheduled end of class.

“I’m satisfied with what we’ve done so far,” said Swayze. “It’s going to be a great trail.”

The class may also construct a stone stair case for an alternate entryway at a different part of the parking lot, and still must finish blazing and insert maps and literature into the kiosk. Once completed, there will be a grand opening and naming ceremony in honor of Lingelbach, a longtime East Barnard resident and nature-inspired poet who contributed to countless environmental initiatives in the Upper Valley, according to TSA head of school Michael Livingston.

“It’s unanimous in the school that it should be named for her,” Livingston said. “We’re very excited to be able to do that.”

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