

Discovery Trail Has 10th Birthday

By Michael Nocella reporter@ithacatimes.com | Posted: Thursday, September 4, 2014 12:00 am

During a “Connecting School and Community” workshop in April 2004 Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI) board of directors members Terry Byrnes and Jennifer Engel introduced the vision for what is now known as Kids Discover the Trail! (KDT). Their admittedly ambitious idea was to connect 3,000 Ithaca School District (ICSD) students from 150 elementary classrooms in eight different school buildings with eight “discovery trail” organizations.

With KDT celebrating its 10th anniversary throughout the entire school year, Byrnes reflected on the program’s roots, and its overwhelming success.

“Ithaca Public Education Initiative has been connecting classroom teachers,” she said, “with community resources through grant programs since 1996. In 2004, IPEI was looking for additional ways to provide teachers and students with access to the vast diversity of educational opportunities right here in Tompkins County. The mission was to provide access for all students to the world class resources of the Discovery Trail and to create excitement about learning in a community setting.”

Despite being around for a decade, KDT—and IPEI—often fly under the radar. Part of that, Byrnes explained, comes from a unique concept being aimed at a specific, limited age group. The curriculum takes place in eight discovery trail locations: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell, Tompkins County Public Library, Museum of the Earth at PRI, Sciencenter, Cornell Plantations, History Center in Tompkins County, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and the Cayuga Nature Center.

“Kids Discover the Trail is a unique educational program,” Byrnes said, “for all elementary school students that each year links all pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students to one of the eight Discovery Trail organizations. Students participate in field trips and related classroom lessons that teach them about art, science, history, literature and the natural world. Although KDT is built around the core hands on field trip experiences, it is much more than just a field trip. It is seven years of multiple learning experiences that include shared projects with other students, special books related to the field trip subject, additional trips with other students to various parts of the community and



Discovery Trail Turns 10

Kids on the trail at the Lab of Ornithology.

classroom activities that reinforce the planned curriculum.”

Engel echoed Byrnes’ look back at KDT’s dynamic success.

“From the program’s inception,” she said, “it’s been about enhancing the school district as a whole. We wanted to create something that took advantage of local resources that brought our students together in an educational environment. At the same time, we didn’t want to make it mandatory—ever. It’s evolved into something that’s had 100 percent voluntarily participation from our teachers, and something that our kids look forward to.”

Engel noted there have been impacts along the way that neither she or Byrnes even considered when first thinking about what KDT could be.

“When a student who lives in downtown Ithaca,” she explained, “gets to make a trip to Caroline, they’ll say things like ‘Wow, we have cows here?’ And when a student who lives in Caroline gets to come up to Ithaca, they’ll say ‘You’ve got roads all around your school?’ in a surprised manner. That piece we never really expected to make a difference, but it has.”

Byrnes recalled the first days of KDT, noting that it began in Ithaca as a small pilot program in 2005 that was centered around a field trip experience. She said as the program impact and logistics were evaluated and approved, program enhancements were added to the core field trip, including a special book for each child related to that year’s learning topic, classroom pairings of students from different schools to increase collaborative learning, and knowledge of other parts of the community, along with extra field trips to extend the learning. By 2009 Byrnes said ICSD had reached 100 percent participation—where it remains today.

As word began to spread about the program, other school districts expressed an interest in joining KDT or replicating it in their schools. Trumansburg Central Schools joined in spring 2010, and had 100 percent participation in the first year. The Trumansburg program used the KDT Ithaca model, and began as Trumansburg Kids Explore and Discover, but is now under the KDT umbrella.

Byrnes said a main priority for KDT in the next 10 years is working now to expand the program to include the other four school districts in Tompkins County, and that Groton, Newfield, Lansing and Dryden will soon be on board.

“KDT began as a vision for Ithaca,” she said. “Now, it is expanding to the other school districts in Tompkins County. It is our hope that soon all elementary students will participate in Kids Discover the Trail and have equal access to these learning opportunities. Since its inception, over 25,000 students have participated in KDT. We want to keep the program fresh and meaningful for the next 25,000 kids. An important part of the future of this program is the continued collaboration of all the partners and the financial support from the community, which makes this program possible. We hope many more will join us in keeping this program going.” •