



## DEC IPEI Grant Helps Push Back Zombie Apocalypse

26 Around Town Written by Mary Grainger

2014



Boynton Middle School sixth-grade students in Vinnie Alcazaren and Keith Harrington's classes completed a four-week study of pandemics and geography with a culminating project that brought the 40 students to 4-H Acres on Halloween to practice their survival skills with Primitive Pursuits staff members. 'Surviving the Zombie Apocalypse: A Study of Pandemics & Geography' was partially funded by a Red and Gold Grant from the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI).

"Our goal was to produce a large, problems-based learning unit that would engage the students while focusing on critical reading and math skills", said Harrington, who had previously worked with Primitive Pursuits and thought they would be a natural partner for the subject matter. "I seek any way I can to incorporate popular culture (e.g. zombies) into class work. It's a huge plus when you get a great amount of enthusiasm and engagement while also teaching students to critically analyze a topic!" added Alcazaren.

Primitive Pursuits' Justin Sutera started the activities at 4-H Acres by gathering the students, many of them in costume, to review the survival "Rule of Three": In any extreme situation you cannot survive for more than three minutes without air, three hours without shelter, three days without water, three weeks without food. Three activity stations followed in which students showcased their survival skills, highlighting their importance in the event of a pandemic, and playfully tying them to surviving in a world full of zombies.



Students practiced making one-match fires and friction fires; building waterproof shelters; and hunting using throwing sticks and an atlatl, a spear-throwing tool used by Native Americans. Primitive Pursuits staff members reminded students at each station that these skills would be helpful in the event of a zombie apocalypse, with fire needed for warmth, cooking, and purifying water; hunting skills needed for food; and shelter needed for protection from both the elements and zombie predators.

Alcazaren added, “It was really rewarding to see our kids enjoy being outdoors and learning different wilderness survival skills from Primitive Pursuits, and to see them apply their learning to something that goes beyond the classroom.”

To prepare for the trip, representatives from Primitive Pursuits came to Boynton to discuss survival skills based on the geography, geology, flora, and fauna of the Finger Lakes region and greater New York. Earlier in the four-week unit, students researched a case study of the influenza pandemic in 1918 and learned about the CDC and virulent diseases. Graphs, charts, and data tables related to the spread of disease were created and analyzed to make predictions about future outbreaks and to reflect on historical outbreaks. Students read several excerpts and short stories related to zombies and survival in order to build background knowledge, working vocabulary, and engagement.

Boynton Principal Joseph Dhara described that all sixth-grade students are enrolled in enrichment classes that “include tailoring the course work to the students’ interests and at the same time addressing academic skills. The teachers work year round to help the students get ready for middle school and beyond.”

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