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Brick by brick

Gym pumps up Haverhill's next generation

By Jonah Frangiosa
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HAVERHILL — What started as a facility for reps and routines has reshaped its identity to help Haverhill's next generation with not just strength — but also with confidence, determination and purpose.

On the fourth floor at 371 River St., coaches aren't barking orders, but instead guiding and mentoring at Brick by Brick Training Systems. The gym held an open house last month in partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Haverhill, bringing about 20 children straight off the school bus and through the doors.

Owner Nyles Connor opened Brick by Brick in 2022. It served as a typical training facility for all ages — many of whom were collegiate-level athletes. Once a vacant mill space, the floor is now a state-of-the-art facility outfitted with every gym-rat's essential equipment, like squat racks, bench press machines and more — much of it hauled upstairs by Connor himself, including the 100-pound dumbbells.

Connor, who also coaches with the Haverhill Hillies Junior Football program, said the gym needed a rebrand. Working with the Hillies gave him a platform, he said, along with developing a trust and voice within the community to extend his coaching into a commitment to youth development.

He decided Brick by Brick shouldn't just be geared toward the heavy lifters and high-level athletes, but also hone in on the young up-and-comers in Haverhill, who may just need a coach to guide them.

"Our mission is to empower youth for future life success," Connor said.

As the kids poured onto the turf last month, they were each greeted with a hand shake or high five by Connor and his assistant coaches, including Anthony Oun. The boys and girls formed a circle around Connor, who slipped into coach mode naturally.

"Everybody, eyes on me!" Connor said in a shout-out. "We're here to have safe fun, and be respectful, how's that sound?"

The kids called out in unison, "Good!"

TIM JEAN/Staff photo

Nyles Connor, center, owner of Brick by Brick Training in Haverhill, works with young people from the Haverhill Boys and Girls Club during an open house. He is also a Haverhill Hillies coach.

He led them through common exercises like pushups, squats and planks, training them on balance, agility and endurance. In one drill, the group split into two single-file lines at agility ladders, shuffling through in-and-out steps, high knees and quick hops designed to sharpen their footwork and speed.

But it wasn't all about breaking a sweat. Connor occasionally took pauses in the workout to speak to the children on the importance of things like tying one's shoes or not giving up.

"We're here to help you guys become successful people in this community," Connor said to the group. "My goal is for you guys to challenge yourselves, to overcome those challenges, and learn a little bit about yourself along your way."

The kids put the work in and were sustained by a table stocked with water bottles, snacks and protein shakes nearby for refueling between drills.

Watching the training session was a crowd of visitors including Executive Director Javier Bristol of the Boys and Girls Club and Katie Cook, president of the Greater Haverhill Chamber of Commerce.

Connor described the folks as "movers" — people who make decisions for the city and shape Haverhill for the better.

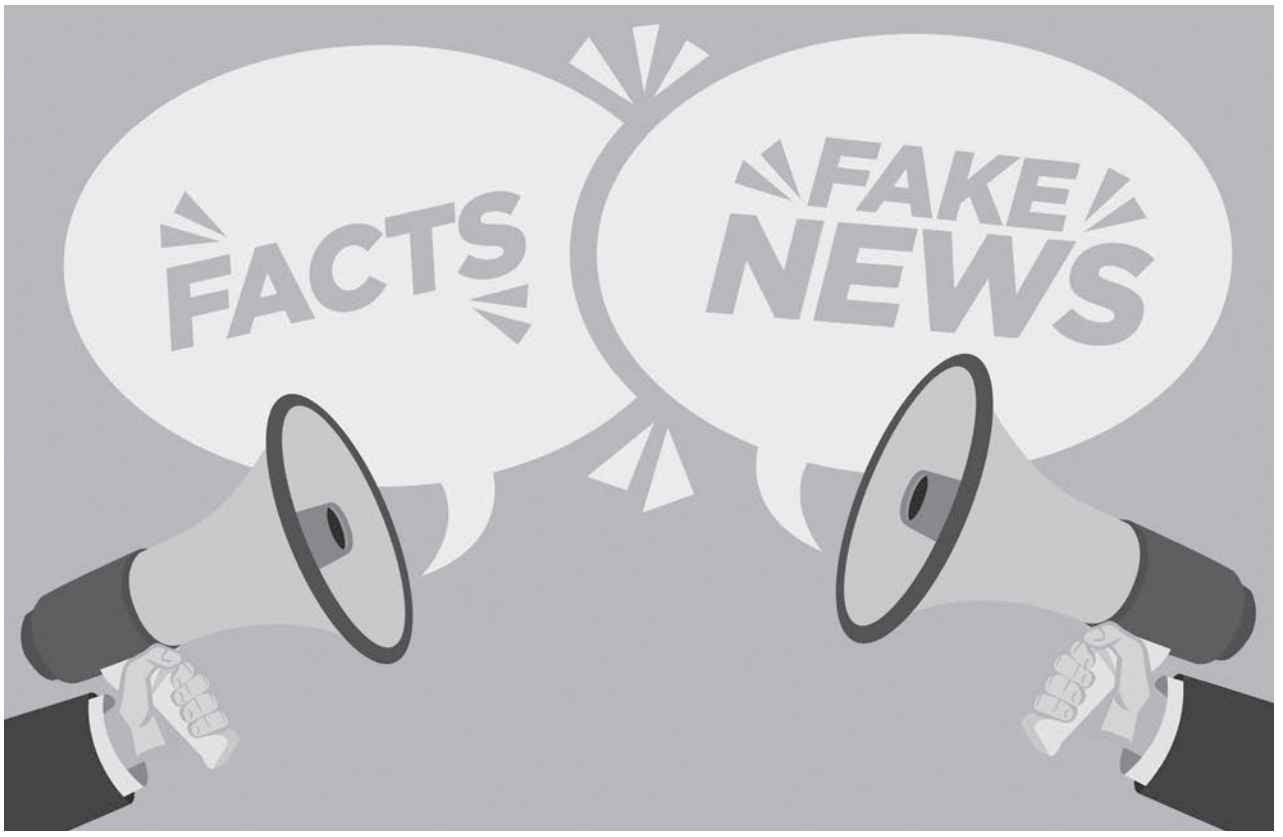
He added that through youth development, he hopes to have a legacy like these community leaders and impact those around him.

Among the onlookers also was Nick Mazzie, who has trained with Connor for more than five years. Mazzie recently completed his senior year at East Carolina University, where he was kicker for the school's football team. He had finished a training session with Connor earlier that morning as he was gearing up for the NFL's Pro Day in March, when prospects showcase their skills for scouts and coaches.

"Nyles is a great dude, and he just has so much passion for this type of stuff," Mazzie said as the kids huddled around the coach.

Laughter bounced off the walls while sweat was brushed from foreheads. Connor led his crew of youngsters through each exercise, not just as a coach, but also as a mentor.

"Truthfully, we're here to help and develop youth. This is just my view. This is my love language." Connor said. "Achieving confidence and helping to create a relationship with health, wellness and performance."



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https://www.politifact.com/

» **FactCheck.org**, run by Annenberg Public Policy Center, performs much of the same tasks, and also let's you ask questions of the fact checkers. An example question: Did the Supreme Court rule that it is illegal to take the oath of office with anything but the Bible? (The answer is no.)
https://www.factcheck.org/

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REAL NEWS IN SCHOOLS

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Here are the basics of the program:

What is it? The Eagle-Tribune partners with local businesses to provide free digital access to our newspaper to anyone within the school at no cost to the school. This access encourages students to value the vital news coverage being produced by The Eagle-Tribune. They will build awareness and gain critical thinking skills in the process.

Who can participate? This program will benefit teachers, students, and the broader school community.

Where does it take place? You can access our newspaper online. Teachers can incorporate the program into their curriculums, even having reporters, photographers and editors visit your class.

When can we start benefiting? As soon as we have your commitment to participate in Real News in Schools we will go to work to find a local business who wants to sponsor you. Once we have one, we will work with your IT Department to get the program up and running.

Why is this valuable? There's a lot of fake news out there on social media and elsewhere. The Eagle-Tribune, founded in 1868 as the Lawrence Daily Eagle and a twice Pulitzer Prize winning publication, has a long track record of fair and accurate reporting that cuts through the misinformation.

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Northern Essex Community College

TIM JEAN/Staff photos

Rick Gorman, the longtime executive director of the North Andover Youth Center, retired after 38 years.

Rick Gorman, the longtime executive director of the North Andover Youth Center, overseas the "half-court shot contest" on the last day as director.

Gorman retires after 38 years

Youth Center director departs

By Angelina Berube
» Staff Writer

NORTH ANDOVER — Rick Gorman's last day as executive director of Youth and Recreation Services in mid-February started the same way it began 38 years ago – waiting.

This was a different sort of waiting, however.

Gorman, 64, of Lawrence, has held his title since the department formed in 1988. He retired from the position Feb. 13 after overseeing, creating and implementing various programs for the youth and community over nearly 40 years.

Gorman's career became a part of the tens of thousands of kids' journeys who came through the doors of the Joseph N. Hermann Youth Center.

He recalled coming to North Andover as a 26 year old, sitting on a brick bench outside during a snowstorm as he couldn't get into the front door where he would assume his new job. The day was Jan. 4, 1988, and he had to use a pay phone by the Old General Store to call someone to let him inside the building.

On his final day, someone else was doing the waiting. One of his "first kids," John McVeigh, was outside the Youth Center's entrance to greet him on his way into work and help close the door on a long chapter of his life.

"He was waiting for me at the front door," Gorman said about the man who now serves as headmaster of Holderness School in New Hampshire. "This will be a tough day as I say goodbye to all the kids."

It's the kids, of course, who have always been the reason work never felt like work for Gorman, he said.

He takes pride in their accomplishments, keeping up-to-date on the center's former youth members, their accomplishments and promotions. He knows when one of them has published a book or opened their a business.

"It's overwhelming to even think about being able to touch the lives of tens of thousands of kids over the last 38 years," he said. "It's so rewarding to see the success they've had."

He didn't know what he was getting himself into back in 1988 after he left a state job as a social worker, three years removed from college, to come to North Andover.

Gorman said at the time some people weren't happy about him being selected for the role. During the interview, he was asked to help the town develop programs for kids and help "at-risk kids."

"I told them (the interviewers), 'all kids are at-risk," Gorman said, drawing from his psychology background.

His first year started as a pilot program to determine if the town would make Youth and Recreation Services into an actual department.

"I had to prove myself for one year, but we were able to do it," he said.

The department has evolved since its humble beginnings to one considered as setting the standard for other communities.

He watched as the Youth and Recreation Department grew over time. He worked out of 17 different buildings throughout town like different school buildings, the library and police department in the early days to run various programs.

The opening of the Youth Center in 2000 allowed the department to house things under one roof and became a place for kids to visit on an everyday basis. Gorman oversaw the planning and building of the center.

It bustles with different programs throughout the day. Kids enjoy the basketball court or games of pool, along with bubble hockey in the 18,000-square-foot building. They come to relax in the Zen room for some quiet time, play board games with one another or attend dances.

High school students come from support and leadership programs while middle-school students during the day turn the center into their own type of clubhouse.

In ever-changing times, the Youth Center continued to serve as a resource for kids through the COVID-19 pandemic. Gorman oversaw the planning of programming during the pandemic and considers it his greatest accomplishment.

Before the pandemic, he witnessed more young people experiencing anxiety and sought American Rescue Plan Act funds to hire a full-time social worker to help with rising mental health issues.

The department is more than the Youth Center as Gorman runs other services at Stevens Pond, the ropes course, a street hockey rink, seasonal programs, other recreational activities and children's shows and concerts on the common in the summer.

His role evolved to become more administrative over the last 10 years. He missed being with the kids, he said.

"I'm a psychologist by trade. So I still run my own group called Core Four just to stay with the kids," Gorman said. "Joe (Agosto), my successor, will do the same thing and build relationships with the kids."

Gorman said he won't be able to drive past the Youth Center for a few weeks, as emotions will still be too high. He also wants Agosto to "spread his wings" as "this has to be his place now."

But one center kid, in particular, turned into a big part of Gorman's own journey and helped him realize the purpose of the job.

Anthony Sideri, who owns Restoration Barber Shop in North Andover, recalled getting talking-tos from the man who turned his life around.

Gorman will see him at least once a month to get a haircut.

"We had very hard conversations when he was younger," Gorman said. "He always was respectful of me, but didn't always listen to me. But it's the conversations that we had when he really got his life together to the point where now he not only is an extremely successful businessman, but also a father of two amazing kids, a husband to a great wife, and does speaking engagements to schools and talks about his life."

Sideri sent Gorman an email on his retirement day. The thought of it brought tears to Gorman's eyes.

"Seeing the man he's become, you sit there and go, 'That's why I do what I do.'"

OPINION

Teaching kids about AI will help prepare for future

The Virginian-Pilot

As part of a good education in our changing world, children should learn how to apply their own developing intelligence to the artificial intelligence that's served up to then in ever larger quantities on the internet. Students need to understand what AI is, know its limitations and learn how to evaluate it.

Schools around the country have wisely worked in recent years to develop strategies that help students use the internet effectively while remaining safe from its risks. The need for such instruction is evident. Students should understand all the media that permeate their lives and learn how to evaluate what they read, see and hear. Digital literacy is critical because children, even at an early age, spend a great deal of time interacting with the world through screens

AI is a constant and increasing presence online. Having a firm grasp about its strengths and limitations will help children use it effectively as a tool — and enable them to identify scams or false information.

Students also need to be aware that AI is increasingly used for cyberbullying. These platforms make it all too easy to generate realistic, convincing deepfakes and other offensive content that can spread quickly. AI cyberbullying is a threat to the mental and emotional health of the victims; young people need to know how to recognize such attacks and report them to a responsible adult.

It's always vital that children be wary of what they see presented as fact and determine the source, including whether the words or images were generated by AI.

Years ago, it took a while for many people to understand that just about anything, including contradictory and false information, could be found online. What appeared on the internet was — and is — only as reliable as whoever is responsible for it.

AI is a constant and increasing presence online. Having a firm grasp about its strengths and limitations will help children use it effectively as a tool — and enable them to identify scams or false information.

AI has supercharged that problem. Content is presented with such authority, even when it's incorrect, that it's easy for anyone to assume that it's accurate. Children need to learn to determine the source and to verify.

Educators also worry that relying on even accurate AI-generated information can be harmful to a child's intellectual development, learning and creativity. Children need to learn to research for themselves, compare sources and think through a question or problem.

None of this is to say that AI doesn't have a place in our world, or that schoolchildren shouldn't be learning how to use it. There are jobs for which it is particularly well suited: repetitive tasks, sorting quickly through massive amounts of data and freeing human workers to spend more time on creative thinking and informed decision making. And tech companies that form the backbone of the internet are integrating models into just about everything these days.

But it's important to remember — and teach our children — that AI is just what its name says: artificial intelligence. It's not human. It has no emotions or sense of right and wrong.

It doesn't have experience or judgment. It can't think. It doesn't readily respond to suddenly changing circumstances.

AI is only as good as the data that is fed into it, and it's all too easy for unscrupulous individuals, governments and organizations to feed it false or misleading data.

Experts say AI "hallucinates," as when it offers content that is demonstrably wrong or makes no sense — to a thinking person. And that's the problem. AI is not a thinking person.

Schools need to continue to teach our children to be able to think for themselves, and to understand that while AI can be, if properly vetted and managed, a useful tool, it is no substitute for informed humans, including themselves.

OPINION

Student protests are the very definition of the importance of 'good trouble'

By Cindy Allen

Commentary

"Get in good trouble, necessary trouble," the late U.S. Rep. John Lewis once advised young people.

Lewis, an American civil rights activist who served in the United States House of Representatives for Georgia's 5th congressional district from 1987 until his death in 2020, was not calling for chaos. Rather, he was calling for conscience while referencing the Civil Rights movement.

In times like these, however, his advice feels less like shedding light on historical perspective and more like civic instruction.

The recent wave of protests, including student walkouts across the country, are not a threat to democracy; they are an expression of it.

The First Amendment does not just protect polite speech and comfortable opinions. It protects the right of the people to peacefully assemble, speak out and petition the government when they believe policies are unjust or their rights are at risk.

From the 1963 March on Washington to the voting rights marches in Selma, Alabama and beyond, peaceful protest has been one of the most powerful tools citizens possess. Lewis himself endured brutal violence on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, not because he sought disruption, but because he understood that silence in the face of injustice is far more dangerous.

The day of Lewis' beating – March 7, 1967 – is often referred to as "Bloody Sunday," when some 600 civil rights marchers headed east out of Selma on U.S. Route 80 and traveled just six blocks to the bridge before state and local lawmen attacked them with billy clubs and tear gas.

Today's student demonstrations — a majority of which have been peaceful — fall squarely within that constitutional tradition. When young people hold signs, speak out and stand together on issues they care about, they are practicing civic engagement, not undermining it. It is a sign of a healthy democracy when the next generation feels empowered to participate in public discourse.

Today's student demonstrations — a majority of which have been peaceful — fall squarely within that constitutional tradition. When young people hold signs, speak out and stand together on issues they care about, they are practicing civic engagement, not undermining it. It is a sign of a healthy democracy when the next generation feels empowered to participate in public discourse.

What is especially striking right now is the growing but predictable hypocrisy surrounding student protests and free speech. For years, many Republican legislators positioned themselves as defenders of the First Amendment, warning about "cancel culture" and government overreach. Yet when students protest policies those same lawmakers support — particularly on immigration or civil rights — the response too often shifts toward restricting walkouts or attempting to silence student voices.

"Good trouble" does not mean violence or recklessness. It means responsible, peaceful resistance grounded in principle. It means using lawful protest to draw attention to policies that threaten to erode democratic norms or basic liberties.

Allow me to be clear: If students leave campus or disrupt school operations, I understand why administrators must enforce reasonable rules and accountability. Actions have consequences, and that is part of the civic lesson, too. But democracy is not passive. It requires participation, vigilance and moral courage.

Responsible peaceful protest is not disorder. It is citizenship in action. And when people believe their rights or democratic institutions are being eroded, exercising the constitutional right to peacefully protest is the very definition of good trouble.

That's a lesson America's youth should be commended for taking to heart.

Cindy Allen is a retired newspaper editor and publisher for CNHI, the parent company of North of Boston Media Group.