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Students brighten up dingy downtown lane in display of ‘tactical urbanism’



Students in the Sustainable Community Development program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst practiced a bit of “tactical urbanism” in Northampton on Saturday, taking over a portion of Kirkwood Avenue off Pleasant Street. STAFF PHOTO/KEVIN GUTTING

NORTHAMPTON — Is an alley just an alley or could it possibly be more?

On Saturday, five students from the University of Amherst Massachusetts gave the city a glimpse of what can happen when creativity and spontaneity are unwound and allowed to roam free.

“We wanted to attract as much of the community as possible and get them excited about what this could be,” Dylan Northrup, a junior studying sustainable community



Phoebe Hagberg, a senior studying sustainable community development at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, talks with Downtown Sounds owner Joe Blumenthal during a “tactical urbanism” event on Kirkwood Avenue in Northampton on Saturday STAFF PHOTO/KEVIN GUTTING

development, said on Kirkland Avenue between Downtown Sounds and Lime Red Tea Shop on Pleasant Street.

For five hours, Northrup and his classmates hosted “At a Glance,” a pop-up event where they installed lights and set up benches and chairs to make the alleyway more inviting for people to simply hang out and chat.



University of Massachusetts senior Lensenok Imsong was among the five students of sustainable community development who initiated a "tactical urbanism" pop-up event on Kirkwood Avenue in Northampton on Saturday, Nov. 3, 2018. —STAFF PHOTO/KEVIN GUTTING



Local musician Jim Armenti, right, of Westhampton talks with students majoring in sustainable community development at the University of Massachusetts Amherst after they set up a pop-up event, "At a Glance", on Kirkwood Avenue, an alley in Northampton, on Saturday, Nov. 3, 2018. Armenti, who teaches music next door at Downtown Sounds, gave them some history on the byway that connects Pleasant Street to the Masonic Street parking lot. From left are UMass students, senior Phoebe Hagberg, juniors Dylan Northrup and Ben Liebman and seniors Kevin Atkinson and Lensenok Imsong. —STAFF PHOTO/KEVIN GUTTING

The idea is a popular one in large cities and it's called "tactical urbanism" — inexpensive, temporary changes to an otherwise underused part of a city, like an alleyway or public terrace, to encourage greater interaction among people.

The pop-up event got a nod of approval from Wayne Feiden, Northampton's director of planning and sustainability, and a thumbs-up from Downtown Sounds and Lime Red, which supplied coupons for the students to hand out. Raven Bookstore provided books for people who stopped by to flip through.

"It looked like an art exhibit," said Northampton resident Aidan Linden, who stopped by to ask about the lights and set-up.

“It’s not known as a friendly place and it’s not owned by anyone in particular,” Ben Liebman, a junior studying sustainable community development, said.

Liebman, Northrup and their three classmates — Phoebe Hagberg, Lensenok Imsong, and Kevin Atkinson — wanted to change that perception.

The other goal of the group, which did the pop-up event for a class called “Research Issues in Community Development,” was to get people passing by to give their own thoughts about how they would like to see the alley used in the future.

“Especially because it’s downtown, people like the idea of having a more productive space,” Hagberg, a senior, said. “It gives a space for people to come together.”

Liebman pointed out that some people are scared to walk through the alley at night.



Ben Liebman, a junior studying sustainable community development at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, talks about a “tactical urbanism” pop-up event on Kirkwood Avenue in Northampton, Saturday. STAFF PHOTO/KEVIN GUTTING-



Students in the sustainable community development program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst practiced a bit of "tactical urbanism" in Northampton on Saturday, Nov. 3, 2018, taking over a portion of Kirkwood Avenue, a small alley off Pleasant Street between Downtown Sounds, left, and LimeRed TeaHouse, center right. —STAFF PHOTO/KEVIN GUTTING

"If there were lights in here full-time it would be a lot more friendlier at night," Liebman said.

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Students in the sustainable community development program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst practiced a bit of "tactical urbanism" in Northampton on Saturday, Nov. 3, 2018, setting up a seating area with books and lights on a portion of Kirkwood Avenue, a small alley off of Pleasant Street. At left, senior Lensanok Imsong talks with Paige Bridgens of Northampton while senior Phoebe Hagberg, center, and junior Ben Liebman, right, talk with Ellen Pader of Northampton, an associate professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning. — STAFF PHOTO/KEVIN GUTTING



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