

## CHALK TALK: Of Archers, Actors and Artists

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Published in print: Tuesday, June 19, 2018

I'm watching from the side of the school gymnasium as a class of sixth-graders, plus physical education teacher Jim Hallett, line up, bows in hand, drawing the string back with precision.

There are no notched arrows today. That's for tomorrow. The next day, when I look in, the targets will have a slew of arrows sticking out of the red bull's-eye centers.

Today, with the help of the Amherst Archery Academy, our students are learning to "find their center" by practicing patience, becoming more aware of their physical presence, and focusing on the target.

A day later, I'm part of an audience, in our school's cafeteria. Up on stage, a group of sixth-graders in the after-school Drama Club, led by teacher Stacy Ashley, are hamming it up for a live version of the picture book, "The Day the Crayons Quit." We're all laughing at the jokes as the young actors use the moment to become someone else other than themselves, even a crayon, as their skills with voice and body movement are on display.

A week earlier, the art room is transformed into a wood-carving space as visiting artist Elton Braithwaite works with small groups of sixth-graders on a wood piece, designed by one of the sixth-graders, to celebrate literacy.

Thanks to the vision of our art teacher, Leslie DiCurcio-Marra, and the Parent Teacher Organization, Braithwaite has been coming to our school for more than 15 years, to teach students the fine intricacies of carving wood and making public art with chisels and hammers. He also speaks to them of self-empowerment, of persistence, of following your passions and your heart.

The work of the students from over the years hangs all over our school, a visual glimpse into the power of making things happen with your hands.

These three events, as well as past opportunities such as our recent schoolwide Puerto Rican Cultural Celebration, are a noticeable reminder that even with the work that we teachers do all year long in our classrooms — and make no mistake, we all work hard to provide rich learning opportunities for our students — the engagement found in hands-on, experiential learning is something amazing to witness.



From the Daily Hampshire Gazette, Northampton, Mass. Used by permission.

]You see your students in a new light: as archers, as actors, as artists.

I'm reminded, too, of earlier in the year, when our sixth-grade hosts its annual Quidditch Tournament for sixth-graders at our school. Now nearly 20 years in existence, the Norris School Quidditch Tournament takes place in early spring. It is the brainchild of a long-graduated student, who upon reading J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," asked Jim Hallett to help a group of students invent a game they could play based on the fictional sport of Quidditch. Decades later, we're still playing a version of that game, a wild sport of movement, teamwork and athleticism that has become a keystone event of our sixth grade and the school community.

As a teacher, I have designed literacy lessons around Quidditch — teaching sports play design, reading activities and more, all focused on finding ways to bring the unexpected (there is no Quidditch on the MCAS) into the traditional learning environment. Our tagline for the game is "Literature in Motion."

The Quidditch experience is an event that resonates with our students for years. It becomes one of the constant stories we share with each other whenever our students return to visit us.

Here's the reality, though. We're lucky. We're lucky that our school has the talented staff and people — the Jim Halletts, the Leslie DiCurcio-Marras, the PTO — to support a vision of learning that extends beyond the traditional curriculum, and then hustles to find the resources to make that vision a reality.

This is not easy. Our school system struggles with financial shortfalls every year. Money is tight. There's no pot of money laying around.

Our shared vision as educators to provide for experiential learning, however, allows us a certain balance. Yes, we read and write with our students. We tackle math problems. We explore the fields of science and map out the worlds of social studies. We push our students hard, and we set high expectations.

And we provide doors for alternative experiences that will enrich their lives.

As the Amherst Archery Academy notes in its slogan, we want our students "to find the center," and grow from there.

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