WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL FOR BLIND CHILDREN

INSIGHTS

URBAN TRAIL OPEN
NEW PATH TO INDEPENDENCE

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Hundreds of spectators cheered on three-year-old Thomas Kovacs as he made his way up to the front of the crowd. Carrying a symbolic torch the last leg of its journey, he lightly tapped it onto the fountain, saw and felt the water begin to flow, thereby officially dedicating the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children's new Urban Trail.

A new pupil in WPSBC’s preschool program, Tommy was one of three people chosen to take part in the torch relay along the Urban Trail to represent the School’s past, present and future students. More than 600 people turned out on the beautiful fall day to celebrate the unveiling of our newest campus highlight, constructed in honor of the School’s 125th anniversary.

Designed as an outdoor instructional space, the Urban Trail begins with a tactile map located at the back entrance of the School and connects to the front lawn. It features numerous custom-made components along the route for our students to explore, enjoy and experience. From an audible cross walk to learn safe-street crossing to an outdoor gazebo big enough to fit an entire class, sensory garden and wheelchair accessible swing set, the Urban Trail was specifically developed for our students with sensory impairments as they learn to navigate outdoors using either a white cane or wheelchair.

The concept originated with the School’s Certified Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Instructors, who envisioned a way to maximize on-campus instruction before embarking on the less-protected realm of mobility training on Pittsburgh’s streets and sidewalks. The overall goals of the project include helping boys and girls meet educational goals, promoting independent travel, improving concept development, encouraging exploration of the environment and increasing students’ self-determination for social and recreational activities.

But the day’s dedication event was all about celebration. Attendees, including students and their families, staff, members of the Board of Trustees, donors, neighbors and local dignitaries, mingled and explored the Trail while entertained by local rhythm and blues band, “Five Guys Named Moe,” (three of the “five guys” are WPSBC alumni). The program also included the gold medal presentation of the School’s paralympic winners who on the day prior, raced along the Urban Trail in the competition’s final heats.

Funded through the generosity of individuals, service clubs, corporate and foundation donors, the Urban Trail will help smooth the path to independence for not only our current students, but for future generations of youngsters with visual impairment served by the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children.
From left to right:
1. The tactile map allows students to orient themselves to the Trail and its features.
2. Chance leads the Pledge of Allegiance at the Urban Trail dedication event.
3. Hundreds of guests gathered on the front lawn to celebrate the dedication of the Urban Trail, the capstone project of the School’s 125th anniversary. 4. Shayna enjoys getting her hands wet in the Trail’s water feature.

Counterclockwise from the left:
5. A wheelchair accessible swing set along the Trail accommodates all of our students. 6. Tamiya receives her medal after racing along the Trail in the School’s paralympic games. 7. A simulated crosswalk features an audible stop light and textured paving surfaces typically used on public streets.
Learning From Scratch: Residential Students Get a Taste of Pie-Making

Smiles and squeals of delight filled the School’s dining room as nearly thirty students in the Residential Program had the chance to become amateur pie-makers this October. For many of the boys and girls, it was a culinary experience unlike any they have had before. The feel of kneading the soft dough, learning to use a rolling pin and scooping the scrumptious fillings into the pie shells provided students with a stimulating tactual experience that was both educational and entertaining.

Blending teachable moments that reinforce instructional goals with activities that encourage socialization, the School’s Residential Program operates Sunday evening through Friday morning. The program is offered to our students who live in outlying areas or have medically related conditions that make it difficult to commute daily.

The evening pie-making event was organized by Frank Zerafa, Executive Chef at Holiday Retirement Corporation, a Vancouver, Washington-based company that operates more than 300 retirement communities throughout the United States and Canada. Zerafa’s daughter, who passed away when she was eight, was blind and her spirit has inspired him to help other children with visual impairment.

“Making the pies is fun and it empowers the kids,” said Chef Zerafa, also a devoted Lions Club member.

Zerafa organizes pie-making events at schools for blind children across the country and finds it a great way to have chefs at Holiday Retirement involved in the community.

Joining in on the fun with Zerafa and his colleagues were several college students from the University of Pittsburgh’s Lions Club. Extra pies were delivered to the local food bank to be enjoyed by deserving community members. Once the students got the hang of it, the baking adventure was as “easy as pie.” Thank you to all of the volunteers who made this activity so deliciously fun! 😊
Congratulations to Linda Almasy-Hohmann, Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children (WPSBC) certified Teacher of the Visually Impaired, for being awarded the 2012 “Outstanding Teacher of Students who are Blind/ Multiply Impaired” by the Principals of the Schools for the Blind (POSB) organization.

Each year, POSB recognizes remarkable individuals from around the nation who work with students with visual impairments. Linda received her prize on Wednesday, October 10 in Louisville, Kentucky at the yearly meeting of the American Printing House for the Blind (APH).

Linda has dedicated her entire professional life to helping students with visual impairment. Since 1992, she has worked at the School for Blind Children where she has taught students of all ages. Known for her inspirational and engaging teaching methods, Linda’s infectious smile and utmost respect for her students have enamored her to both her colleagues and parents of her students.

“I make the analogy of a teacher being a lantern. I am a lantern in a student’s life, lighting the pathway,” said Hohmann in her award acceptance remarks.

“During the past twenty years at the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children, I have had the marvelous opportunity to be a lantern to students and their families. I hope to help light their pathway as they seek the best for their child, and to believe that there will be lanterns along each step of the way to guide them,” said Hohmann.

And with her extensive expertise and seemingly endless patience and enthusiasm, students thrive under her instructional guidance. “Her impact on our students and their families is difficult to measure or put into words, but a national award is a fitting tribute to her life’s work,” said Todd Reeves, Executive Director/Superintendent of the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children.
Recognizing the many advantages of an inclusive child care environment, the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children introduced an integrated child care program in 2012 that blends young children with visual impairments with sighted typically developing peers.

A Child’s VIEW: Vision In Extraordinary Ways Early Childhood Center is located on the Oakland campus of the School and provides comprehensive, blended child care for children with or without visual impairments ages 6 weeks to 5 years. This one-of-a-kind program is specifically designed to benefit all children, no matter their ability level or sensory challenges.

For more information on A Child’s VIEW, visit our website: www.wpsbc.org or contact Dr. Rebecca Renshaw, Center Director, at 412-621-0100 or email renshawr@wpsbc.org.

School Debuts “My Talking Picture Board” iPad App Developed for Students with CVI

In collaboration with Little Bear Sees, the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children has produced an iPad application for individuals with cortical visual impairment (CVI). Available on iTunes, “My Talking Picture Board” is an innovative learning tool that allows users to create personalized two-dimensional object identification exercises using their own recognizable photos and voice.

More than 65% of the School for Blind Children students evidence CVI, a visual diagnosis caused by brain abnormalities and not deficiencies of the eye. With proper intervention and training, students with CVI at WPSBC are improving their visual functioning and educational success.

Seeing two-dimensional images can be particularly difficult for students with CVI. The app offers an engaging, customized experience focused on improving this skill. Arrange uploaded images on the play screen and then encourage the user to reach and touch a particular object. When touched, the object will activate the reward set (either an audio recording, movement or both). Tailor the experience further by selecting background images of varying levels of complexity to make the task more or less challenging.

If you have questions about “My Talking Picture Board,” contact Beth Ramella, WPSBC Director of Outreach, at 412-621-0100 or email: ramellab@wpsbc.org.

A Peek Inside “A Child’s VIEW”

Blending opportunities allow boys and girls of varying abilities to learn from each other; here preschool students explore braille cells and the tactile map along the new Urban Trail.
From Our Perspective
Snapshots of School Life
Captured by Our Staff Members

Sisters Lucy and Sophie enjoy a Creative Arts concert together. Lucy attends a Child’s VIEW child care program, and Sophie is a student in the School’s early childhood program.

Chase and Dominick explore nature up close and personal with their occupational therapist, Mark.

Dom enjoys a well-deserved treat while out in the community during an orientation and mobility lesson with Maria.

Evan presents a contribution to the School’s time capsule, one of the many activities that commemorated the School’s 125th anniversary.

Cayden’s grin is picture perfect during this classroom activity.

Alyssa joins staff members Amanda and Peggy as they celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Lion’s Den, the School’s on-campus retail store where our young people learn valuable vocational skills.
Senior Clark Mantini is organizing a pasta dinner to benefit the School for Blind Children the evening of March 2, 2013. “The people at the School for Blind Children do so much to help my sister (9-year-old WPSBC student Kaylee Doyle) that I wanted to do something to help them,” said Mantini. The event will be held at Chartiers Valley High School. If you would like more details or are interested in volunteering, please call 412-621-0100 x363.