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It's 'hike,' not 'mush': Mount Airy Middle School students meet, learn about sled dogs

By AKIRA KYLES

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Mount Airy Middle School sixth graders, from left, Laida Govier, Alayna Gilmore and Nathan Campos check out a wheeled training rig used for dogsledding practice by Maryland Sled Dog Adventures, LLC during a visit to the school Wednesday, March 4, 2020. (Dylan Slagle / Carroll County Times)

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Mount Airy Middle School students participated Wednesday in a hands-on presentation about a furry new addition to their curriculum.

Middle-schoolers were able to meet, pet and learn about six sled dogs as part of a presentation at their school. And beyond that in-person experience, the students will be following the Iditarod dog race while simultaneously learning geography, math and doing some readings.

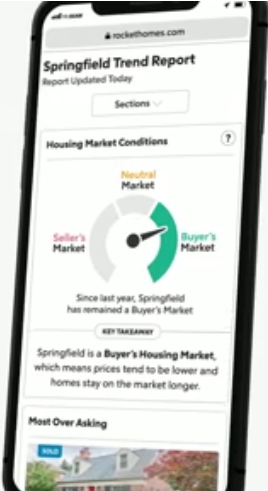
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“We’re going to start off in the media center for about a week and a half,” said Diane Haddad, an English teacher. “We’re going to take a look at geography of Alaska, the different checkpoints and what’s included in the sled mandatory race rules.”

Pam Lichty, media specialist at Mount Airy Middle, also loved the traits that were represented in the dogs and dog race that the kids could learn.

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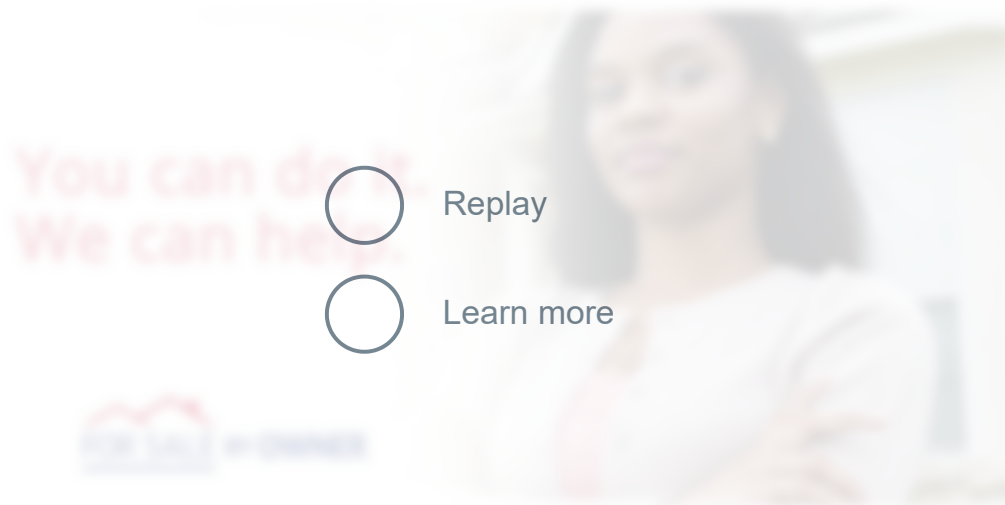
“Persistence, devotion, stamina, loyalty, those were all good things we could work in, and it also has a lot of different aspects,” Lichty said. “It’s really just a wonderful

experience for the kids in a lot of different ways.”

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Haddad organized the presentation with Lichty in the hopes of inspiring the students.

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“I think a respect for animals will be reinforced,” Lichty said. “I think the animal/man relationship between dogs and their keepers is remarkable, and I hope they’ll be inspired and excited about gathering the information.”

Wednesday’s sled dog presentation was brought to the students by Maryland Sled Dog Adventure LLC, based north of Baltimore. Owners Catherine and Eric Benson have given presentations like this often, seeing about 4,000 to 5,000 kids a year.

This is the first time the school has hosted the sled dogs.

In their presentation, the duo talked about the materials needed for dog sled racing such as a harness and booties for the dogs, different parts and usage for the sled,

certain temperatures for racing, the positions of the dogs, and the ropes used for the dogs to pull the sled.

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Catherine also debunked some common misconceptions; for instance, even though they are called mushers, they don't say "mush" to get the dogs moving — they say "hike, hike" like in football. Many in the young audience made audible reactions to this revelation.

Some students were selected to assist in harnessing the couple's sled dog named Nisha.

Sixth-grader Briannan Degnitz was happy to learn about the dogs.

"I feel impressed that all of this has been happening, like how long these dogs have been doing this," Briannan said.

Along with the "how to" explanation, they also said dog sledding isn't just something you do on the side but more of a way of life.

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"Understand that mushing is not just you get these dogs and you decide that you have them, it's a lifestyle," Eric said. "For us, what we didn't talk about is we also have three kids, we have a total of 12 dogs, so for us we're out training our dogs somewhere between three to five days a week, sometimes it stretches up to six and seven days, just depending on how things have gone."

According to Eric, in many cases, their children also train with them before they go to school.

Catherine said their sledding lifestyle controls other aspects of their lives.

“Our dogs impact every single thing we do in life, from whether we can take a vacation and all go away as a family to what time we get up in the morning, typically about 4:30 a.m., and that is pretty much seven days a week, 365 days a year,” Catherine said.

Even after the presentation, students were able to continue learning what the dogs do, how they're transported and how to interact with them.

One student retained a lot of the information and was eager to learn about something new.

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“I’ve learned that dogs, they can pull a 55-pound bag filled with equipment, which is pretty amazing that just dogs in general can do such amount of work,” sixth-grader Ethan Wareham said. “I think it’s cool and amazing. These dogs are nice, and I love learning about new stuff.”

Akira Kyles



Akira Kyles joined the Carroll County Times in 2019 after graduating from Morgan State University, where she was managing editor and editor in chief of the school paper, The MSU Spokesman. She has previously written for The Afro-American Newspaper and Baltimore City Paper, and attended the POLITICO Journalism Institute. Reach her at 410-857-7890.

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