

2020 Summer in the City

Boston Explorers helps kids explore their interests, and their city

By Seth Daniel

When Alphonse Litz was growing up in Syracuse, there wasn't an historic site or a walking trail that his working class family didn't visit and learn about. It was a way for them to experience their surroundings, and occupy their time on a fixed budget.

But, he said, it was so enriching for him growing up, that he was surprised after many years of being a Boston Public School teacher that many kids in his classes and under his guidance had never seen Boston's rich historic trails or experienced its lush amenities. It was with that in mind – and some disappointment as an educator existing in the standardized testing era – that he set out to found a program to let kids explore their interests and the historic city they live in.

That's when he founded Boston Explorers – a summer and school vacation program that has grown from 11 kids in the basement of a South End Church in 2011 to more than 275 kids in three two-week camp sessions (plus February and April School Vacation weeks).

"I was going into a third grade classroom carrying a large stack of MCAS tests into the room, and one of the third graders said, 'There's the man that brings the tests,'" said Litz, a long-time resident of the South End and former public school teacher in Mission Hill. "I was devastated. I had been about radical changes in education and focusing on kids learning, and then that came out. I went home and told my partner Bob about it and it had been the most depressing day I'd ever had. That's when I started to launch Boston Explorers. It wasn't a question of if, but when. I had the luxury of being able to go out and start the camp in 2011. We started with 11 kids in the church basement and

we explored the entire city."

In addition to visiting places like the USS Constitution, historic homes like the Nichols House or Otis House, the Public Gardens, rowing on Boston Harbor and figuring out how to travel on the MBTA – the camp also features a time of reflection for kids where they can choose to do things they like, but in a non-electronic environment.

That could mean building something in the wood shop, playing Foosball or bumper pool, jumping rope, building with Legos or quietly reading. The four goals of every day, Litz said, are to explore Boston, have fun, be kind to everyone and make things with their hands.

"We try to do those things every single day," he said. "I want to get kids back to working with their hands, learning like I did from my father, who was a carpenter. I want to share that. Kids don't miss the phones. Some of the feedback I've gotten is that even the older kids don't mind leaving the phone behind because they can really just be a kid again...So much play is scripted by adults like in sports or ballet or music lessons. This is a place kids can go to have full choice over what they want to do. They are guided by adults, but kids have room to choose and learn."

That's where it becomes what Litz and Assistant Director Sakura Tomizawa call a throwback kind of summer camp.

"This is the kind of camp your grandmother would recognize," said Litz. "The kids value the freedom...It's a child-centered program really all about play and exploration. We have turned down grants because we don't want to do education. It's about play, exploring and learning through that. Kids love it and we keep on exploring."



Boston Explorers is a camp that brings kids front and center with the historic sites in the City that often elude those who live here, and it also allows kids to explore their own interests in a non-electronic environment. The camp has grown from 11 to 275 per year since 2011.

Boston Explorers is tailored to kids age 6-14 in a mixed-age camp that features numerous staff members and older teen trainees. Campers are well-supervised on the trips through Boston, and many of those supervisors are former campers too.

Over time, Boston Explorers has moved its base camp from Union United Church in the South End to the Rafael Hernandez

School in Jamaica Plain. From there, they start and end their days, but have excursions that include visiting historic homes, or leveraging partners like Emerson College to get a behind the scenes tour of the Majestic Theatre.

It's literally like a buffet of activities – going so far as to include African drumming with the Hyde Square Task Force partner from Jamaica Plain.

Ironically, many of the kids in the camp have never been on the Freedom Trail or contemplated the statues in the Public Garden. For a lot of kids in Boston, those things can seem like parts of the city that are only for tourists – not for children growing up here.

At Boston Explorers, Litz said, the City is in their hands.



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weeks will look alike. From exploring the islands in the Boston Harbor to studying and recreating some of Boston's historic landmarks, Summer in the City is bound to be a great fit for students of all interests!

Session 1: June 22–26

Session 2: June 29–July 2*

Session 3: July 6–10

Session 4: July 13–17

Session 5: July 20–24

Session 6: July 27–31

Session 7: August 3–7

*Session 2 is only 4 days due to the July 4th holiday.

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