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SENIOR CAPSTONE PROJECT LOOKS AT AFFORDABLE HOUSING

MIDDLETOWN, R.I. (MAY 31, 2022) – These days, it seems like everyone is talking about affordable housing in Middletown.

Even students at Middletown High School.

For their end of year Capstone project, seniors Harris Offenbergs and Owen Witkos did a deep dive on the potential of turning the former Peckham School on Green End Avenue into affordable housing for local senior citizens.

Learning more than they ever dreamed about what went into an affordable housing project, Offenbergs and Witkos said they felt the Capstone experience would be helpful as they moved onto college.

“It was very interesting going out in the real world and talking with people who were actually doing this for a job, not just studying it,” said Offenbergs, who is going to the University of Maryland to study computer science and engineering. “I found that people are willing to help you if you just ask.”

“If people see you are passionate about what you’re studying, they’ll help you,” added Witkos, who is going to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute to study computer science. “They don’t want to see you fail.”

Over the past two decades, students at the Valley Road high school have had to complete a Capstone project as part of their work towards graduation.

The idea of the Capstone is to have students do an extensive, months long project that’s far from their normal comfort zone to expose them to the “real world” outside their work in the classroom.

Projects have included everything from teaching students about where their food comes from to organizing a fundraiser for the Aquidneck Island National Police Parade, putting together surfing lessons for those with disabilities, the importance of organ transplants and

hundreds of others.

On Thursday morning, a panel of four educators — front-office assistant Maria Dowler, Librarian-Teacher David Fontaine, Principal Jeff Heath and physical education teacher Eric Wright — sat ready for the formal presentation in the Project Lead The Way lab at the back of the school.

About a dozen onlookers and supporters were in attendance, including Senior Center Executive Director Arleen Kaull and her lieutenant Chris Johnson. In addition to playing tennis and on the swim team together, Offenberg volunteers at the senior center, where Kaull and Johnson suggested Offenberg and Witkos do their Capstone on affordable housing.

Wearing sharp blazers and ties, Offenberg and Witkos opened their presentation with information about the housing crunch in Middletown.

Then, they moved through how they fine tuned their study of the now vacant space next to the Senior Center at 650 Green End Ave.

This included visits to Town Hall, the Middletown Historical Society and Frank Spinella, the town's consultant who's studying affordable housing, looking for the blueprints of the old Peckham School. Because a complete set of plans wasn't available, Offenberg and Witkos took a tape measure and hand measured the parts of the two-story building where records didn't exist.

They formed a grading system to judge the different designs they tried. Among the criteria that factored into their grades were the functionality of the kitchen and bathroom, how much closet space was available, the design of the living area and bedroom.

Using a computer slideshow and notecards for reinforcements, it was clear Offenberg and Witkos knew their stuff, showing no signs of any nervousness ever.

Offenberg and Witkos moved from pencil and paper designs into computer aided drafted layouts, where a one-bedroom apartment with an open kitchen, living room-dining room combo and bedroom with attached bathroom won out. A one-sixteenth scale model of the apartment made of foam board, paper and 3d printed appliances was passed around by those on hand.

At the end of the presentation, Offenberg and Witkos took time to thank the grading panel, Kaull and Johnson, their teacher Zachary Fenster and their friends and others who showed support. In response, the entire group applauded loudly, thanking the two for their efforts.

"I love the fact this is an existing problem that's literally two miles down the road and you're addressing it here," Heath said. "This is what it's all about."

Fontaine said everything was fantastic with the presentation Thursday, but he knew how much work went into pulling it off.

“The planning and preparation, that’s what’s really important and stands out,” Fontaine said. “That’s where all the work really pays off.”

Kaull and Johnson agreed, saying Offenberg and Witkos took their idea and ran with it.

“I am so, so impressed with what they’ve done,” Kaull said. “To think that these two young people studied this and came up with very workable solutions is amazing. They definitely did some intense research here and spelled out the different options. It was a great presentation and very easy to follow.”

“They were a little stuck and looking for an idea and they knocked it out of the park,” Johnson said. “This is real world type of stuff and I’m glad they were able to look into it.”

Fellow seniors Keara McEnroe and Gigi Shaver were in attendance to show support for their friends.

“My Capstone running a youth lacrosse camp taught me a lot about working with younger people,” McEnroe said, who’s heading to Fairfield University to study computer science. “There’s quite a bit more to leadership than just showing up and it was a real positive experience for me.”

“I did a (lacrosse) camp too and it was a lot fun,” said Shaver, who’s going to San Diego State University to study anthropology. “I definitely didn’t want to be one of those authoritative coaches that a lot of us don’t really respond to.”