MCC’s New Fitness Trail Rediscovering a Recreational Gem

Under a bright blue sky, with a brisk wind gusting through the meadow, more than 75 Middlesex administrators, faculty, students and community partners gathered recently to officially open the new MCC Fitness Trail.

Located behind Trustees’ House on the Bedford campus, the two-mile series of trails has been waiting for decades to be rediscovered. Supported by a Middlesex Community College Foundation grant through the Annual Fund, the new Fitness Trail was created over the past year by the Student Activities Division.

The trails system was originally the inspiration of a priest who lived on what is now MCC’s 200-acre Bedford campus when it was a Marist seminary and farm. Opened in 1926, the seminary provided educational programs and training for the Catholic priesthood. One priest, a teacher of Greek and Latin, had a particular interest in the woods and nearby pond, and took it upon himself to cultivate those areas. Under his direction, the pond was dredged and the wooded trails landscaped.

“When the roots of academia first found footing on this piece of land, a nature-loving priest discovered a remarkable woods,” said Jonathan Crockett, M C C’s Coordinator of Fitness, Recreation and Student A ctivities, during the opening ceremony.

“It was these woods that offered spiritual retreat, recreation and tranquility for the students and priests of the Marist seminary. That community has long since disappeared, replaced by the Middlesex we know today,” he said. “For years, these trails have been all but lost and forgotten with each passing season – until today.”

Under the direction of Crockett, the revitalization of the overgrown trails system involved a number of MCC personnel. Last fall, Middlesex volunteers cleared trails as part of the college’s 2008 Day of Service. Staff from MCC’s Facilities Department also helped clear trails, and installed signage and equipment at the project’s 10 fitness stations.

Winding through the woods, around a pond and across a meadow, the Fitness Trail consists of two loops. The 1.25-mile loop includes 10 Fit-Trail stations that outline a series of scientifically designed exercises at each stop. When combined with walking or jogging, this loop can provide a well-balanced physical fitness routine for the entire body. The shorter .75-mile walking/jogging loop, encircles the frog pond.

While the trails have been there for decades, most MCC folks – not to mention the college’s neighbors in Bedford and Billerica – rarely ventured out to walk them. Even Middlesex President Carole C. Owen, who has been at the college more than 30 years, hadn’t explored the trails. All that changed when the ribbon was cut to officially open the Fitness Trail and dozens of people trekked off into the woodland.

“This network of trails is not simply a path through the woods,” said Crockett. “It’s a rich and complex part of the history of this land. It’s a connection, literally and symbolically, to Bedford, Billerica and many towns and cities beyond.”

Crockett hopes the Fitness Trail will serve as a recreational resource for hikers, runners, snowshoers and anyone interested in birdwatching or wildlife observation. It is expected to link up to the Bay Circuit Trail, a series of more than 200 miles of trails that stretches across the state of Massachusetts, from Duxbury to Plum Island.

“This place is filled with memories for me,” said Art Smith, who grew up in Bedford and chairs the Bedford Trails Committee. During his remarks at the opening ceremony, Smith recalled the genesis of the tract of land the Fitness Trail now occupies.

“Out in these woods was a strange and somewhat forbidding place called the Marist seminary,” said Smith. “That it became Middlesex has lifted the veil and produced one of the more outstanding assets of our community.”

- Patrick Cook

**Fitness Trail Preservation Fund**

The Middlesex Community College Foundation has created a Fitness Trail Preservation Fund to help maintain and sustain the new trail system. Call the MCC Foundation at 781-280-3522 to make a donation.

**Happy Trails!**

For more information about MCC’s new Fitness Trail, contact Jonathan Crockett, Coordinator of Fitness, Recreation & Student Activities, at crockettj@middlesex.mass.edu or 781-280-3785.