

ENTREPRENEURIAL GRIZZ BIZ KIDS LEARN CRAFTSMANSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, SOFT SKILLS

GREAT FALLS, MONTANA—At age 20, Gavyn Brubaker of Great Falls owns and operates Greenleaf Landscape Management and oversees four full-time employees. He credits the Great Falls Public Schools' Grizz Biz program for part of his success. "The program teaches soft skills, creates a work ethic, and teaches what real life is like. It helped me learn to manage people and work with clientele."

Grizz Biz teaches students how to run a business. Students take product orders and determine logistics; run computers, bandsaws, and drill presses; measure, laser, sand, and finish products; and fulfill orders. They sell the wares, including Montana-shaped cutting boards and imprinted coasters, online and at the Great Falls Farmers' Market and Montana State Fair.

"We do all the awards for the state fair, on a 24-hour turn," according to Pat Volkmar, who runs the program at North Middle School along with wife Jenn and GFPS teacher Roger Spring. Pat teaches at North Middle School and Jenn at East; both have entrepreneurial experience they instill in the students.

"Students learn the rules of the world of work," Pat Volkmar says. "They learn to work on a team, show up on time, meet deadlines. They hold each other accountable through a student-run board." The hard work pays dividends, he says. "Profits are split among the kids. Half goes back to the classroom and to the cost of equipment, such as new saws. The other half goes to the kids based on the time they put in." The students also earn Career and Technical Education credit for the program.

Shane Myers was hired by Dick Anderson Construction following Grizz Biz and four years of high school wood shop. "Grizz Biz was a great opportunity for me," he says. "I learned I could make money, when I was too young to hold a real job." He advises current students: "If you want to succeed, you've got to put yourself forward; you've got to be willing to work."

The summer 2021 program includes 17, 7th-9th grade boys and girls and is the only such middle school program in Montana, according to Jenn Volkmar. It ran throughout 2020 with social distancing and other health protocols. "We're here because we want kids to have this opportunity. For some, school is the stable environment—a safe, secure place," she says. "It's exciting to see them grow up and be so productive. We love that the kids want to be here. And they learn that they can have fun at work."

The program is supported by a Gianforte Family Foundation grant and by partnerships with local businesses including the Good Wood Guys, Modern Cabinets, and Windsor Plywood.

Grizz Biz summer student Kaitlyn, age 14, is attending CMR next fall. She says, "I get new opportunities to see how an actual job would work. I did production during the school year and now do office and bookkeeping work, plus production."

Ben, age 13, an 8th grader at North this fall, will be a Lead for Grizz Biz, following his summer experience in production. He uses Corel Draw software to laser coasters for a Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center order and thinks he'd enjoy a job as a craftsman or carpenter when he's older. "I like it; it's fun," he says.