

A young child, wearing a blue helmet and safety harness, is climbing a large wooden utility pole. The child is gripping metal rungs and has one foot on a red climbing device. The background is a clear blue sky.

MARION KANE | SIGMA KAPPA | PROFILES



MAINE SEACOAST MISSION

# BULLETIN

FALL/WINTER 2024

COMMUNITY  
FIRST



**Rooted in a history of compassionate service and mutual trust, the Mission seeks to strengthen coastal and island communities by educating youth, supporting families, and promoting good health.**



**The theme of this edition of the Bulletin is *Community First* — language that emerged during our recent listening and planning sessions. *Community First* is part oath and part rallying cry. It is both Mission history and Mission plan. A prayer and a promise.**

In the context of our recent planning, *Community First* is meant to capture the Mission's ongoing dedication to supporting our island and coastal neighbors in the ways that are most meaningful to them—community-by-community and person-by-person.

*Community First* means helping young people find mentors and role models who believe in something bigger than themselves. *Community First* is being there for those who step into local leadership roles, even in times of strife. It means making space for food pantry neighbors and volunteers to find sustenance in each other. *Community First* means investing in infrastructure that fosters belonging—on *Sunbeam*, on school playgrounds, and on our own Downeast Campus.

As with every very human and very nuanced matter, it takes more than a couple of words to share the meaning of the Mission. In the following pages we invite you to see for yourself what *Community First* might mean to those we work alongside every day and to you.

For the Mission!

John Zavodny  
President  
Maine Seacoast Mission

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COMMUNITY FIRST



Students from D.W. Merritt Elementary School's EdGE program celebrate in front of the climbing wall.

# THRIVING DOWNEAST

**O**n a Tuesday morning in September, the Mission's 63-acre Downeast Campus bustles with activity. Outside the Downeast Engagement Center, patrons sit on the porch waiting for the food pantry doors to open at 9:00 a.m. sharp. They greet one another and chat about how their days have been. From their perch on the porch, they watch students participating in the Marion Kane Leadership Program attack the new challenge course with gusto. Screams, laughter, and cheers float across the road as the gathering crowd looks on with interest.

Last winter, the campus was busy with construction when work on the Downeast Engagement Center—home to a welcome center and an expanded pantry—began. In

early spring, a new, pole-based challenge course was installed next to the Ed and Connie Greaves Education (EdGE) Center. By the end of May, with construction vehicles gone, it was common to hear students' excitement echo across campus while neighbors enjoy the trail system or attend an event.

Since the campus has fully reopened, the Mission has seen greater engagement and an increased sense of belonging from community members. One of the places most evident of that is the renovated food pantry.

With Washington County residents facing increasing levels of food insecurity each year, more neighbors were utilizing



Pantry volunteer Brenda stocks shelves while a neighbor shops in the background.

the pantry than ever before. The aging building no longer met baseline needs. The Mission queried community members to understand what amenities and engagement features would create a sense of greater belonging, then began designing. "We thought about flow of staff, volunteers, and patrons, along with how the building would be used," explains Downeast Director Jenny Jones. "We wanted the pantry to feel warm, welcoming, and a place someone would go and stay for a while."

The new pantry space mimics what an old-fashioned country store might look like, from the front porch with rocking chairs to small shopping carts. When you walk through the teal double doors, Food Pantry Coordinator Stacy Openshaw welcomes neighbors. On one side are shelves with staples including canned vegetables, pasta, beans and legumes, hygiene and baby items. Then there are glass-coolers and freezers like you would find in any grocery store stocked with produce, dairy, and meat. The pantry also has cafe-style tables

where patrons and volunteers can grab a cup of coffee and sit down to chat and socialize.

SheKara, who has experienced food insecurity for a little over six months, says using the pantry means she does not need to choose between paying a bill and feeding her family. She explains, "The pantry is similar to a store with a comforting and welcoming environment." She joked that the cafe area is another favorite reason to visit.

"I hear from patrons how beautiful this place is. They like that it's larger than it was before and much easier to get around," Stacy says. "We have a small group who gather here on Tuesdays to visit with each other."

While the Downeast Engagement Center was built to forge stronger connections and create a stronger sense of belonging, the improvements have led to community members thriving. It is now common to see patrons sitting down to chat with volunteers and staff. Brenda, a pantry



An EdGE summer camper crosses the Burma Bridge obstacle on the challenge course.

volunteer, explains, "There is a greater sense of community. Even on hectic days, people sit down, have a cup of coffee, and greet and talk with one another." For those who come and for those who have visited, they know the Mission and its donors created a place that encourages togetherness and conveys a sense of empowerment.

Across Weald Bethel Lane and next to the EdGE Center, there is another empowering space for community members. The Mission's challenge course, affectionately known as Charlie's Challenge, is a key activity for EdGE summer camp and Marion Kane Leadership, and a rite of passage for participants. Each year, EdGE students eagerly await a try on the course. Cherryfield Elementary School students even developed their own phrases for it, a secret code only they know and that passes from students year to year. Climbers "squeeze their juice box" to make sure a carabiner is secured and they "rock out" to check their helmet fit.

Completed in May, the bright, new course

is an improvement over its previous iteration. The old course, nestled in the woods of the Downeast Campus, had limitations. Only one or two people could climb at a time, so the rest of a class would stand and watch without being engaged in the activity. The old course was also starting to age and becoming harder to maintain. EdGE Primary Program Director Isaac Marnik and his staff started planning for a new, pole-based version. They selected 14 course obstacles that generate high engagement, so multiple users can climb or support on the ground.

Reflecting on their experience on the new course, students are often shocked about what they accomplish and how their peers encourage them. "I was so surprised by the support I got from my classmates, especially from people I'm not close to," Lexi, a participant in the Marion Kane Leadership program last spring, explained. Brady agrees adding, "Everyone had trust in their classmates to keep them safe."

Students who participate across all Mission education programs, including Journey and



Students from Rose M. Gaffney Elementary School support their classmate on the climbing wall.

EdGE Afterschool and Summer Camp, are eager to try the new obstacles. Each time a group hits the course, you can feel the excitement in the air.

The new obstacles focus on different skills including teamwork, trust, communication, determination, knowing one's limits, and supporting others. Now, students who might have struggled on the old course have more opportunities to try out different elements and be involved in new ways.

Carolyn Nadeau, the sixth grade ELA/SS teacher at Rose M. Gaffney Elementary School, who brings her class to the EdGE Center for the leadership program, said the changes have had positive impacts. "Students are now always active and focused in all parts of the course. The different belay and supporting roles make them build a sense of responsibility towards their classmates," she explains. From supporting to guiding, the high and low-to-the-ground elements require cooperative engagement.

EdGE staff stress to each climber that the course is "challenge by choice" meaning the climber decides what they want to do. Rachel Singh, a fourth grade teacher also at Rose M. Gaffney Elementary School, brought her two sons to Charlie's Challenge when the Mission offered two free open climbs this summer. "It was interesting to watch the boys on the various obstacles. They have completely different personalities, and that came out on the course," she explains. "It was clear they felt safe to try new obstacles knowing they only had to complete as much as they felt comfortable."

With neighboring communities hearing about the new Charlie's Challenge—and peeking at it as they drive by campus—there are increasing requests from community groups and nonprofit partners to use it for their own team-building initiatives. To see if this is possible, the Mission will consider its current staffing levels and other resources.

The food pantry and the challenge course are not the only updates to the Downeast



Neighbors shop for food from the new coolers and freezers. In the foreground are cafe tables.

Campus that has enhanced community engagement. After visiting the pantry or watching a sibling tackle Charlie's Challenge, families can walk down Weald Bethel Lane to enjoy improved hiking trails, and a new play area shaped like a large boat. With swings, rings, and even a ship's wheel, kids have a safe and fun space to play while their siblings participate in programming, or during community-hosted activities utilizing the campus like the weekly Downeast Table of Plenty dinner or a Mano en Mano community fair.

Back at the Downeast Engagement Center at the head of campus, the older administrative section of the food pantry which houses five staff members was reconfigured to include a welcome center. Visitors are greeted by staff who can direct them to services and activities on campus. Down the road, near Weald Bethel Community Center, two cabins have been added to host workshops for teens, house service volunteers working with Mission programs, and in late fall, act as the "elves' workshop" for the Christmas Program.

As the Mission's programs grow, the campus can adapt to fit different needs. "Looking across all our services and envisioning the future of our organization, we designed the campus for growth," explains Jenny. "The Mission opted to create space for our team to expand but also provide a place if a community member needed a quiet room to work or to have a meeting. It's been successful. I consistently hear statements about how much community members love the campus."

The changes have naturally supported Washington County residents to forge stronger community connections as well as create a sense of belonging. This makes the organization, its programs, and its sites more accessible and welcoming for all. And walking on the Downeast Campus, this is clear to see, from Mission neighbors walking the trails, grabbing a cup of coffee, and chatting with each other. They know they belong. 

# THANK YOU

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*No matter how hard times get,*

the Mission will be there, helping sustain and strengthen families and communities. Please join us.

Your donations bring warmth when it is cold, shed light where it is dark, and give strength when burdens grow heavy.

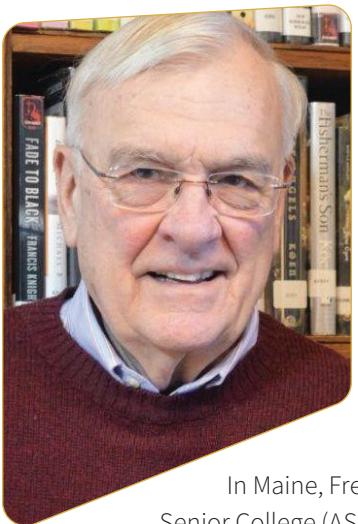
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Donations may be made at [seacoastmission.org/donate](http://seacoastmission.org/donate).

The Mission wishes to express gratitude to **Tonda Olson** for a \$500,000 gift that grows the impact of the Scholarships program.



# Welcome



## FRED BENSON, NEW BOARD MEMBER

A retired Army Colonel, Fred served combat tours in Vietnam and Korea and worked in the offices of the Army Chief of Staff, the Secretary of the Army, and the Secretary of Defense. Following his time in the Army, he was the Vice President for National and International Affairs for Weyerhaeuser Company and served as the President of the US-New Zealand Business Council. Fred was trustee for the Center for Naval Analysis and Lafayette College, where he was also the president of the Alumni Association.

In Maine, Fred served on the boards of Friends of Acadia and Acadia Senior College (ASC). He has presented on international affairs and military matters at ASC, College of the Atlantic, and the University of Maine. His son, the Reverend Rob Benson, worked aboard *Sunbeam* from 2002 to 2014. In addition, Fred established a Mission Scholarship with his late wife, Ann.

## Community Member Profile

### DERRICK SIBBALD, ISLE AU HAUT



#### What's special to you about your island?

I think my favorite thing is probably the community. Everyone is close, and you know everyone. I don't think this is an isolated thing to Isle au Haut. And it's a beautiful place. There's a certain sense of freedom living in a more remote community.

#### What's challenging?

There's a lot of physical challenges of getting stuff here. Living here, it's not easy to get what you need. There are also emotional challenges, it's harder to meet new people, but I feel like you have better connections with the people you know. It's kind of a tradeoff.

#### What do you like to do here?

For work, I lobster. I've done that for 30 years. When I'm not working, I like to go hiking with my dog or go swimming in the pond. My favorite trails are Seal Trap Trail and Long Pond Trail.

#### Is it important for the Mission to visit your island?

What I like about the Mission is that it feels like part of the community to me. I have a very close relationship with the people on the *Sunbeam*. And I think the *Sunbeam* connects the outer islands, even though we generally don't interact that much.



#### How long have you been on your island, or coming to your island?

I moved out to Isle au Haut in 1993, when I was a kid, and we moved off in 1996. I moved back in 2013.

## Leadership and the Legacy of Marion Kane

In 2012, a new program started to take root on the Mission's Downeast Campus. EdGE had been in existence for a decade, but the staff wanted to stay engaged with students who no longer attended afterschool.

After working with educators and stakeholders Downeast, the decision was made to create the Marion Kane Leadership Program where students would learn skills to help them transition into middle school and their teen years. It was named after Marion Kane, a well-known leader in the Downeast community. Marion played a critical role in the creation of EdGE when she invited the first EdGE Director, Charlie Harrington, to see different afterschool programs collaborating with the Barr Foundation. These visits created the groundwork for EdGE. When the leadership initiative began, Marion had recently passed away and it seemed like a fitting tribute to name this influential program after her.

While Marion Kane Leadership has evolved over the years, it holds ideals that the program began with in 2012. Students are given a safe space where they can think critically about challenging topics and work on skills like communication and trust. Students spend time on the challenge course,

where they work together to meet their goals whether it is climbing up the rock wall or traversing smaller, lower obstacles. Students also test their abilities, push their boundaries, celebrate their successes, and help each other. "It is extremely rewarding to watch students build trust in themselves and in their peers. Sometimes they come with no intention of climbing on the challenge course, but throughout the day they take small steps outside their comfort zone," says EdGE Youth Development Coordinator Wren Wakeman. "The smile on their faces when they achieve a goal they did not think was possible, it is priceless."

Students often see these successes and comment on how great it was to try something new. Max, a student at Rose M. Gaffney Elementary School in Machias,

remarked, "I faced my fears on climbing every obstacle. My goal was to complete or get on each obstacle and I achieved that goal."

The skills they practice on the challenge course are reinforced in a classroom section called "Exploration." These structured activities and games create meaningful conversations. There are also discussions about how each person's unique perspective is necessary to complete certain activities.

After each day, the groups debrief and talk about what they learned focusing on how they can use these experiences going forward. Throughout the year, Mission staff follow up on these programs with in-school activities, which will build on the skills students learned over these three days.



Students in Marion Kane Leadership support each other on an obstacle.

# A Lasting Partnership Continues to Blossom

In 1911, Sigma Kappa Sorority members at Colby College sent the Mission Christmas gifts to deliver to island children. Two years later, Sigma Kappa alumna and the Mission's Assistant Missionary, Hannah Powell, wrote to her sisters, "Would the Sigma sisters minister with their presence? Would they share gifts of teaching, of music, of housewifery... Would they do it, not for a day but for a whole summer, or - for a life?" The answer was an emphatic yes, and in 1918, Sigma Kappa chose the Mission as their national philanthropy. Now in 2024, the sorority just celebrated its 150th



A Sigma Kappa sister works on creating a new step of steps on a home Downeast.

anniversary and has 119 college chapters across the country. And their partnership with the Mission is still strong, with sisters and alumnae actively supporting the organization, by sending Christmas gifts, fundraising for programs, and volunteering at Mission sites.

When the sorority chose the Mission as its philanthropic

partner, they began to financially support the employees who were usually Sigma Kappa sisters that taught on unbridged islands. In *Hauling By Hand: The Life & Times of a Maine Island*, author (and Mission board

evolved over the years, the connection between the two organizations has always been strong. A few years ago, Sigma Kappa Foundation wanted its members to participate in the act of service, a concept deeply embedded in the sorority's values. So they reached out to the Mission. The Foundation made its inaugural trip to Maine in 2023, returned in 2024, and are planning a third trip in 2025.

During their trips, the sisters learn more about some of the Mission's programs including Housing Improvement, Food Security, the Christmas Program, and Island Outreach.

member) Dean Lunt highlights one of these sisters, Lucy King, and her impact on a community. In 1920, when she came to Frenchboro, Lucy organized and taught at the school, developed community activities, and held Sunday school and church services.

While the ways the sorority has supported the Mission have

## Partner Profile

ANN BACKUS, HARVARD CHAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

### What is your name? What organization do you represent?

My name is Ann Backus and I work for the Harvard Chan School of Public Health. I work in occupational safety and health and environmental health, under the Department of Environmental Health. I am funded by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences.

### What program or project are you collaborating on with the Mission?

I'm collaborating with the Mission on trying to inform fishermen about safety risks. We also get their ideas about emerging issues in the industry and their thoughts on how we can address them. We pride ourselves on being bidirectional and trying to get a sense of what the community needs.



### Who are the people that benefit from your work?

We work with both children and fishermen. For children, we share coloring books made by the Shaw Fund. I also have a stability exercise with a card stock boat, where students add paper clips or rubber bands above or below the center of gravity and they see if they can balance the boat. Then we talk about the real-life implications of that.

For adults, I focused on a number of different things. One thing I was interested in was talking about carbon monoxide emissions from boats. We

discussed whether they have a dry exhaust or a wet exhaust and the difference. There is a back draft concept. If you have a wet exhaust, the carbon monoxide from the emissions can circle back onto the boat and get caught under the overhead. If people are working at the stern of the boat, they might get a headache or feel a little woozy. And if that's the case, they should stop the boat and get some fresh air before they continue.

### What has been a memorable moment of the trip?

I think seeing the kids get excited about ideas in the realm of safety and having them realize that they do have a vocabulary, and if they didn't before, they do now. The other fun thing was seeing how these communities spend time together. ↗



# Summer Meals Support Student Success

This summer, 286 kids in kindergarten through eighth grade took part in the Mission's EdGE Summer Camp in Downeast Maine. These weekly camps include fun activities, exploring the outdoors, field trips, crafts, games, and much more. But for many kids and families, this camp can be a lifeline. At just \$35 a week, EdGE Summer Camp is affordable, and with scholarships available for anyone who needs them, it is also accessible for most families, giving them a safe space for their child during the summer. The program also offers free breakfast and lunch to all campers, bridging a gap that opens when schools close for the year. In the school districts where the Mission runs EdGE programming, around 40% of students qualify for either free or reduced lunch.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, students in Maine can receive breakfast and lunch at their school for free, regardless of their income level. While federal funding for the program ended in June 2022, Maine was one of the six states that decided to continue to offer universal free meals. Studies have shown that in states where universal free meals continued, food insufficiency rates for children, defined as sometimes or often not having enough to eat, were lower than in those

that stopped the program. It was especially impactful for families who have incomes right above the cut off for free meals, who might otherwise struggle to afford this resource.

"We know that many families who participate in summer camps rely on the meals provided by schools," explains Downeast Director Jenny Jones. "It is important we continue to offer meals throughout the summer." To provide these meals at camp, the Mission works with the Maine Department of Education to become a summer meal site. To be a certified site, the person preparing the meals must be ServSafe-certified and make the meals in a professional kitchen. All meals must meet the USDA nutritional guidelines and the kitchen must pass an inspection each year.

By following these guidelines, the Mission is reimbursed for the meals they provide.

When families register for summer camp, they can decide if their child

receives meals. Usually around 120 students receive two meals a day across all the sites. The meals are made in one of the participating school's kitchens and then taken to the different camps. Breakfasts include fruit, a grain, and milk, and are often similar to what a student would receive during a regular school day. A typical lunch will include a sandwich (with protein), fruit, vegetables, and milk. The lunches are usually made to be eaten outside or on the go.

Summer camp is not the only time students in EdGE receive food. During every EdGE afterschool session, there is a dedicated snack time. Students can receive a snack from the EdGE staff, or they can eat their own snack.



## Thank you

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# Coming up

## Northeast Harbor Christmas Festival

Saturday, December 7  
at 6 Old Firehouse Lane,  
Northeast Harbor  
2:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.  
Jingle Bell Crafting for Kids  
3:15 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.  
Santa & Mrs Claus arrive  
on the *Sunbeam* at the  
Northeast Harbor Marina  
3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.  
Open House

## Mission Downeast Christmas Event

Friday, December 13  
at the Weald Bethel  
Community Center,  
39 Weald Bethel Lane,  
Cherryfield  
4:00 to 6:00 p.m.

