

Collaborating to Tell the Island's Stories

THE QUEST PROJECT

HIGH SCHOOL students examine the illustrated panels placed by the Martha's Vineyard Museum on the new Steamship Authority ferry Island Home, taking notes. Edgartown elders meet with an audience of educators at the Old Whaling Church, sharing childhood memories of village life. Home-schooled children in West Tisbury enjoy an adventure while learning to use the resources of their public library. Seventh-graders collect information on the "Seven Wonders of Oak Bluffs." And soon, kayakers will explore the shores and shallows of Sengekontacket on an outing that tells the story of the pond and the human community around it.

All these activities, and more, are the fruits of a program called Questing. It's a young program on the Island, dating back only a few years, but now a group of organizations led by the Martha's Vineyard Museum has seized upon it with a powerful burst of creative energy.

The Museum and Valley Quest, a nonprofit agency based in Vermont, recently announced that they will work together, with a \$30,000 grant from Davis Weinstock of Chilmark, to build a new Island program, Quest Martha's Vineyard. Steven Glazer, the director of Valley Quest, has already visited the Vineyard several times for training programs here. With the grant, he will mentor and facilitate the creation of an Island program that will stand on its own in years ahead.

Questing is a place-based education model which uses treasure hunts inspired by the old English pastime of "letterboxing." Each Quest is an adventure first for its creators and, later, for its participants. It's all about sharing a community's distinct natural and cultural heritage — its special places and stories.



Jill Bouck

These panels, placed throughout the new Steamship Authority ferry Island Home by the Martha's Vineyard Museum, are the focus of a Quest being created this spring by students at the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School.

Explains Mr. Glazer: "Our program actually grew out of the League of Women Voters of the Upper Valley. Back in the early 1990s, they were looking back over a span of about 20 years and saying, wow, this community is really changing — and if we project forward another 20 years, will we even be able to recognize it? Will we have a memory of who we are and what was here?"

Treasures All Around Us

To meet that challenge, Mr. Glazer's organization developed the idea of the Quest, a hunt in which the real treasure is the adventure itself.

"This program," he says, "is about making treasure hunts that help people see the treasures that are already out there, that maybe they haven't appreciated before. It's about opening people's eyes. It's a process where, perhaps in a playful way, people move into a deeper relationship with a place."

Suzan Bellincampi, now director of Felix Neck Wildlife Sanctuary, was education coordinator for The Trustees of Reservations when she first met Mr. Glazer at an off-Island conference. "Right away," she recalls, "I thought Questing was such a cool idea. I really believe in engaging people, and here was this great way to move people from passive to active learning. Here's a self-guided educational tool that can actually be fun."

Ms. Bellincampi wrote a Menemsha Hills Quest to demonstrate the possibilities, and soon she was working with students at the Martha's Vineyard Charter School, making a Quest at Cape Pogue. And in the spring of 2005, she brought Mr. Glazer to the Island to introduce Questing to a group of Island educators. Among them was Lynne Whiting, education director at the Martha's Vineyard Museum.

"I wanted to get Lynne involved,"

says Ms. Bellincampi, “because I see natural history as just one part of the total history of a place. You don’t have nature without people and culture.”

Mrs. Whiting saw the possibilities immediately.

“The cool thing about this program,” she says, “is that depending on the ingenuity and the circumstances of participants, they can take it and personalize it and use it in a whole variety of ways.”

The Island Program Grows

She recalls: “I took my training and ran with it. We had money from the Institute of Museum and Library Services for a summer institute for teachers. We offered a training in Aquinnah in the summer of 2005, and that resulted in what we called the End of the Island Quest, which now belongs to the Aquinnah Cultural Council. Then in April of 2006, we offered another training for teachers, with the same IMLS funding. That was held at the old West Tisbury Library, and resulted in a West Tisbury Village Quest.” Recently another training workshop held at the Old Whaling Church culminated in an Edgartown Village Quest.

Another individual inspired by the first Island training in 2005 was MVRHS teacher Natalie Munn. A group of her students created eight Quests that were published by the Martha’s Vineyard Times in a booklet which is available at Island bookstores and libraries.

A Quest Martha’s Vineyard Council has been formed with the Martha’s Vineyard Museum as lead agency, including representatives from the Polly Hill Arboretum, Felix Neck, FARM Institute, The Trustees of Reservations, Island libraries, the high school, Vineyard Conservation Society and Native Earth Teaching Farm. Also participating as supporters of the Quest program are the Martha’s Vineyard Preservation Trust, West Tisbury Library, Aquinnah Cultural Council, Chilmark Library, the Martha’s Vineyard Public Schools, the Martha’s Vineyard Times and the Steamship Authority.

Looking ahead, Suzan Bellincampi has been working this spring on plans for a two-day Quest program built



Lynne Whiting

In West Tisbury, home-schooled children embark on a Quest that helps them learn the skills of research and the resources of a public library.

around Sengekontacket, featuring a panel of community members speaking at the Rod and Gun Club on May 11 about their relationship to the pond. And this fall, the Martha’s Vineyard Museum will bring Mr. Glazer to the Island for a week of programs, including the creation of a Village Quest for the town of Vineyard Haven.

Says Mr. Glazer, who has introduced Questing to scores of communities across the United States, “I’m almost blown away by the quality of participation we’re seeing on the Vineyard.

“It’s a flexible process, and people can see this as a tool for a lot of things. I think the difference on the Island is that people are looking to this program for its highest possible use, not just as a recreational tool. The highest use is trying to have a long-term vision for the future of a place. The future is going to depend on community-building, and on partnerships between old-timers and newcomers, between

children and adults, across the generations. It’s about giving people a formative experience of place that makes them feel and act differently.”

He concludes: “The thing I’m enjoying about this Vineyard group is the way they want this program in its fullness, and they’re putting in the energy to do it very well.”

Matthew Stackpole, director of the Martha’s Vineyard Museum, is equally excited about the way the Island Quest program is taking off.

“The treasures are all around us here — but if you don’t have a way to stop and look, you can miss them. Questing opens up a level of appreciation and understanding for where you are, and that’s really what history is all about. And the process here fits into our whole mission of collaboration. We’re all stronger when we connect with the great talent that’s out there.

“This is really an opportunity for us here at the Museum to be at the center of something which is going to be a gift of value to the whole community.”