

Daniel Michaelson and Susan Sgorbati

BENNINGTON

PICTURE A PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL where the students are all excited about what they're learning. Make those students the kids generally considered *least* likely to succeed: the truants, the troublemakers, the kids who just don't seem to fit. Give them a reason to keep coming to school, a sense that they're being listened to, and that what they do today can make their lives better and more interesting.

That's what Susan Sgorbati, 53, and Daniel Michaelson, 58, did when they created Quantum Leap, a program in Bennington for students who might

otherwise drop out of school and leave formal education behind.

Michaelson and Sgorbati are professors at Bennington College. He teaches


mediation and costume design; she's a dancer who became involved, and eventually trained, in the art of mediation, then persuaded Michaelson to take the training too. ("I knew he would be fabulous at it, and he is," Sgorbati says.)

The two were working as mediators in Bennington Superior Court when a judge who admired their work mentioned a backlog of truancy cases and asked if they thought mediation could be used to deal with some of them.

Quantum Leap went beyond what the judge had asked for. The program, masterminded by Sgorbati and Michaelson, uses trained mentor-mediators to expose disaffected kids to new experiences and share their own passion for learning. Students who've been used to failing focus on photography, computer animation, caving — anything constructive that really interests them — and begin to see learning as a way of life that can connect them to a better and more interesting future.

The mentors also bring together students, school officials and families to hammer out an education plan that ignites the student's interest and satisfies the school. Sgorbati says the mediation process puts students and their families at the center of the decision-making.

"These kids are used to people telling them what to do," she says. "Many of them have enormous authority issues. And some of the families have been alienated from school for generations."

Quantum Leap started in 1999 with seven students. The program now has its own classroom and offices at Mount Anthony Union High School and works with middle and elementary school children as well. The measure of its success is the fact that all but a few of the 155 students it has served so far have reconnected with their education and have finished or are on the road to finishing school. 

Susan Keese lives in Newfane and Melissa Pasanen lives in South Burlington. Both are frequent Vermont Life contributors, as is photographer Kevin Bubriski, who lives in Shaftsbury.



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