



Contributed photos / Whitby School

Above and below, students at Whitby School in Greenwich work on a social distance-inspired weaving project.

Weaving it together

Whitby School educators using loom, art to promote closeness during a time of distance

By Justin Papp

GREENWICH — On a recent day just a few weeks into the school year, Whitby School eighth-graders and prekindergarten students gathered in the middle of the gym, where a 4-foot-by-6-foot loom was stationed.

From the group of students, two names were called at a time by Whitby's Head of School John Creeden. In each pairing was an eighth-grader and a pre-kindergartner, who met near the center of the basketball court, grabbed opposite ends of an 8-foot ribbon and



walked it to the loom.

The ribbons — which were lined with inspirational sayings chosen by each of

the upperclassmen — were then secured on the frame. Ultimately, they would

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become the warp of the weave that would take shape that day in what has been an ongoing show of school unity during the coronavirus pandemic — a “weaving together” of two of the classes at the coeducational private school.

“We thought, let’s take this 6 feet of distance, which can be viewed as negative, and let’s look at it in a very positive light,” said Margaret Reilly, the school’s director of marketing and communications at Whitby, which offers Montessori and International Baccalaureate programs.

The project is meant as a physical representation of the #WhitbyToghether theme created this school year by Creeden, Reilly and other staff, including art teachers Amy Budzelek and Pamela Chapman. Budzelek and Chapman, in particular, felt the hashtag lent itself naturally to a weave, the

warp and weft of which cross one another similarly in a grid-pattern.

The project also builds off a recent tradition at the school: At the end of the school year, eighth-graders and students coming out of Children’s House (preschool through kindergarten) usually participate in a joint graduation ceremony.

But with the COVID-19 pandemic upon the country, that ceremony was not possible at the end of last year and is up in the air for the coming spring. So administrators wondered whether there was a safe way to replicate the sentiment.

“Rather than holding hands, we can use this ribbon so they can walk side by side,” Reilly said.

Many of the adages chosen by the eighth-graders for the project are pithy and inspirational.

“Anything is possible,” “Live free, unrestricted,” and “Create your own path,” are just a few. Others are more verbose. “Without determination, risk-taking

and being open-minded, it will be hard for you to value everything you learn, your experiences and mistakes and how you grow as a person,” one says.

“The project got me thinking about how we’re connected and this kind of metaphor of us as a tapestry,” Budzelek said. “All these individual threads together, that are essential and interconnected. ... And it was about the eighth-graders. ... We wanted to highlight them and their leadership.

According to Chapman, who taught a weaving class at the school last year, both eighth-graders and the pre-K students have bought into the project. The younger kids, in particular, were in awe of their older classmates during that first day of weaving and were especially excited to receive shirts from their peers that said “Class of 2029” on the back.

“The students are really excited to be here,” Chapman said. “And I think that

was an event that felt more normal. Being able to get together with their eighth-grade counterparts, it was a very special thing for kindergartners.”

In the coming weeks and months, the loom will be wheeled around the school. Every student and staff member will add his or her own ribbon to the weave. At the culmination of the project, the textile will be hung from the rafters of the school’s Renaissance Hall, for all to see.

The project is the first in what Reilly, Budzelek and Chapman said they hope will be a series of creative ideas to unite students during the pandemic. It will likely not be the only artistic manifestation of the #WhitbyToghether motto, they said.

“The idea was how can we bring people together in a fun and creative way, in a time that we’re very separate but in need of connection,” Budzelek said.

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