

## Mascoma Bank Supports Finding Our Stride

by Frank Orlowski

As someone who worked several years for a local non-profit, I can attest to the importance of receiving support from other successful businesses and organizations. Without that support, financial and otherwise, many small non-profits could not carry out their missions of serving others in the community. We are fortunate to have many philanthropic institutions willing and able to support these local not-for-profits; a leader among those institutions being Mascoma Bank.

Over recent years, this column highlighted several help organizations Mascoma supports; this time, the focus is on Finding Our Stride.

Founded a dozen years back by Norwich resident Jenny Williams (who serves as the organization's executive director), Finding Our Stride (FOS) is an after school program focused on recreational running for students throughout the Upper Valley.

Marisa Donovan, director of operations and development for FOS, explains the program. "(We're a) running program that boosts fitness, self-esteem and resilience, and connects kids to peers, mentors and community. The school-based program, which focuses on serving schools where more than 30 percent of students receive free and reduced-price lunch, is completely free to families and schools..."

At a time when so many children are glued to technology via phones and computers, and overweight problems plague many young people, a program such as this seems essential.

The students taking part are not left on their own in devising a running plan; adult coaches play a major role in the program, says Donovan. "Most of the coaches, all of whom receive modest stipends, are

educators who have existing mentor relationships with student runners. Research shows that children who have close relationships with trusted adults like these experience improved mental health well into adulthood.”

During its life as an organization, the work of the FOS team helped many students and schools, says Marisa Donovan. “Since its inception twelve years ago, the organization has benefitted more than 3,000 children and expanded to serve 28 sites across Vermont and New Hampshire.”

A few of those schools involved include the Dothan Brook School in Wilder, the Ottauquechee School in Quechee, and the Thetford Elementary School.

Students taking part in Finding Our Stride do not run alone, but in teams. This teamwork aspect of the program benefits not only those students, but other help organizations in the area, says Donovan.

“Envisioning community engagement as the ultimate form of teamwork, FOS provides each team an opportunity to partner with a local non-profit... Teams select organizations to benefit through fundraising or donating goods. Beneficiaries have included humane societies, homeless shelters, food pantries, medical centers, trail alliances and funds for school playground improvements,” she says.

In the fall, teams of FOS runners take part in the CHaD HERO run, benefitting Dartmouth Health Children’s and CHaD. The teams and families, through various fund raising means, raised over \$31,000 at last year’s CHaD HERO event, says Marisa Donovan; “The top fundraising team for the entire event!”

Of course, much of this work would not be possible without supporters such as Mascoma Bank, as Jenny Williams notes.

“Mascoma Bank provides a shining example of effective and generous philanthropy in the Upper Valley and Finding Our Stride is honored to be one of the worthy recipients. We are grateful for the support, which keeps our programming free and accessible for over 1000 Upper Valley youth each year!”