

Sugarin' Day draws students

The seniors helped out as part of a New Visions class

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CORTLANDVILLE — While most high school seniors spent their Saturday morning relaxing after a week of classes, a group of students were up at 7:30 a.m. tapping maple trees behind the Lime Hollow Center for Environment and Culture.

Participants in the Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES New Vision Environmental Science Program demonstrated what they had learned over the past few months during Lime Hollow's 20th annual Maple Sugarin' Day. About a dozen students spent most of the morning in a small sugar shack on the future site of Lime Hollow's Environmental Education Center turning sap into syrup, passing out samples and educating guests on the sugaring process before visitors made their way to Lime Hollow's Visitor Center for a pancake breakfast.

The one-year New Vision course is for seniors who may be interested in learning more about nature or a career in environmental science.

"My students have been tapping maple trees and waiting for sap to run

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Joe McIntyre/staff photographer

Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES New Vision senior Chelsea Vallileeh, left, shows Emily Benjamin, 9, of Cortland, how maple syrup is made, Saturday at the Lime Hollow Center for Environment and Culture in Cortlandville.

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over the past several weeks and they are basically learning the whole process of maple sugaring,” instructor Jay Elko said. “Nine local districts, I believe, along with BOCES sending their high-school seniors out here to get some college and career readiness that they don’t get in a classroom.”

Elko, who is facilitating the program for the first time but has 22 years of teaching experience, said he thinks one of the significant benefits of the program is equipping students with career skills they can use after graduating.

“This is a presentation,” Elko said. “Whether it’s in a board room or to people that are walking by that have their 8-year-old out to learn about maple sugar. They’re meeting people and ... presenting information and showing all those communication skills and 21st century skills that you need. They get real-world experience.”

Former instructor Tim Sandstrom retired from the position in December after 19 years, but was helping out in the sugar shack as students boiled sap in the evaporator. Sandstrom said he agreed with Elko, having spoken with a number of former students who have secured jobs in environmental science over the years.

“It give kids a chance to learn on their feet instead of their seat,” Sandstrom said. “I think the program has also turned kids back on to education. Whereas they get kind of soured on public school and in their senior year they get excited about learning again and it helps them step into college with a more positive attitude.”

About 20 feet away from the shack, students Alex Klaes, 17, of Cortland and Nadine Downing, 17, from Homer, were attempting to make maple candy and drizzling maple syrup over samples of vanilla ice cream.

Klaes and Downing said they appreciate how New Vision has taught them more about nature while taking advantage of being outside of the classroom and meeting new people.

“Ever since I was a little kid I’ve loved the outdoors and this is honestly, like, the best program,” Klaes said. “If you liked Boy Scouts ... it feels just like that but you’re learning more and it’s everyday in school and it’s really great.”

“There was an opportunity for juniors to come here and visit and it looked like so much fun,” Downing said. “After going to school for half the day it’s just nice to get outside — and you get to meet new people, people not from your school. It was a great choice to apply to this class.”