



Red Canyon High School English teacher Kendall Vanvalkenburg spearheaded the skatepark project that is three years in the making.



MORE THAN A SKATEPARK

An English teacher learned to skateboard and then taught her students lessons beyond the classroom.

By Laura Lieff

While the big recreational news in Gypsum is that a brand new skatepark will celebrate its grand opening on September 15, the most intriguing part of the story is the people behind the skateboards. In 2020, after Red Canyon High School English teacher Kendall Vanvalkenburg taught one of her students to read and speak English, that student told “Ms. V” they wanted to teach her how to skateboard. So Vanvalkenburg learned—not an easy feat for anyone, nevermind someone who was 28 years old at the time and had never been on a skateboard. While learning her new skill and talking with her students, Vanvalkenburg also learned that the Gypsum Skatepark wasn’t a desirable destination for young Eagle County skateboarders.

“The kids pointed out that one of the main problems with the Gypsum Skatepark design was the amount of space taken up by unskatable features and a large bowl with no flow,” Vanvalkenburg explains. “This poor design resulted in less efficient use of the park, where only a fraction of the park was skatable. Another issue was the lack of seating areas and shade structures.”

After learning about the skatepark’s deficiencies, Vanvalkenburg began teaching

a project-based class appropriately called “Skateboarding” which entails time in the field (aka skateparks) and in the classroom. Vanvalkenburg explains that project-based learning is guided by a driving question and theirs is: “How can I use my individual identity as a skateboarder to positively enhance skateboard culture in our community?” Throughout 2021, the class visited skateparks all over Colorado—including Breckenridge, Aspen, Snowmass, Edwards, Arvada, and Leadville—and finished at Woodward in Copper. The students took the time, did their research, and made notes about what aspects of those skateparks they wanted to incorporate into the new Gypsum Skatepark design. By the time the students met with Gypsum Town Council, they were ready.

THE PROCESS BEGINS

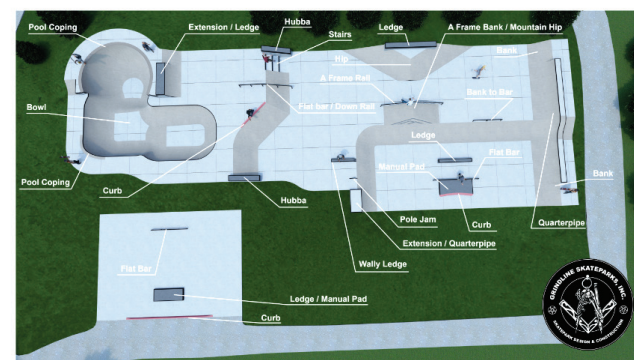
In January 2022, the students approached Town Council with a proposal to build a new skatepark. According to the Town’s Marketing and Communications Manager, Taylor Slaugh, the students’ presentation consisted of two parts. First, they explained why the current skatepark wasn’t constructed for skateboarders of all levels and that it was missing several important components such as safe places to sit.

Next, they pointed out that a well-designed skatepark fosters mentor/mentee relationships that happen organically when an entire community uses it.

While the Town Council was intrigued by the idea, and was impressed by the determination and motivation displayed by the students, the question was who was going to build it and who was going to pay for it. “The Council said they would provide \$40,000 for the design phase and then bid it out to design firms to find out how much the project would cost,” says Slaugh.

Following the Town Council meeting, the kids established SK8 Gypsum which is a grassroots organization affiliated with the Eagle Valley Community Foundation. Comprised of both Red Canyon and Eagle Valley students, the SK8 Gypsum group also created social media pages and a website for their organization.

Next, Vanvalkenburg taught her class about writing Requests For Proposals (RFPs) and created a rubric for the companies that bid on the project. Town Manager Jeremy Rietmann visited the class to assist with the RFP lesson and talk about how and why an RFP is necessary as part of municipal/government procedure. Alec Beck with the Skatepark Project also provided instruction on how to write RFPs.



Clocking in at 10,000 square feet, the skatepark is a recreational jewel for the Town of Gypsum.

“The class wrote and sent out RFPs and six well-known firms responded,” adds Slaugh. One of those firms was Grindline, a Seattle-based firm that specializes in the planning, design, and construction of cast in place concrete skateparks all over the country. Their team visited Gypsum twice for community input meetings and spent time in Vanvalkenburg’s classroom. In the fall of 2022, Vanvalkenburg, her class, and students in the SK8 Gypsum organization worked directly with Grindline and the Town of Gypsum to finalize the design.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Vanvalkenburg’s kids raised over \$125,000 for the project—\$80,000 of which was comprised of cash donations and grants. Additionally, many of the sponsors contributed via in-kind donations. The list of grants and sponsors is impressive (see sidebar) which Slaugh says is a testament to the time and effort put in by the students.

Additional funding came from the Town of Gypsum’s Holy Cross Energy Fund which could only be used for recreational efforts. “Council approved using some of that money for the skatepark because they are very interested in recreational amenities,” Slaugh explains. “Gypsum is located at the end of the Valley, so we don’t get resort benefits like the towns that are closer to Beaver Creek and Vail.”

One of the main in-kind sponsors was Ryan Hobart of High Country Customs, LLC who partially donated the shade structure and fabricated it. He also built three benches, created sponsorship plaques (which he showed the students how to help

weld), and donated a lot of his time. Slaugh says that thanks to all the sponsors and donations, and hard work by Grindline, the project finished under budget.

Clocking in at approximately \$855,000 (the cost of construction, amenities, and design), with a square footage of 10,000, the skatepark—as well as the surrounding landscaping, benches, irrigation, and shade structure—is a recreational jewel for the Town of Gypsum. “We are all very excited about the new skatepark and our relationship with Kendall and her kiddos is great,” says Slaugh. “It’s been nice to see them trust the process.”

YOUTH LIAISON

Throughout said process, Vanvalkenburg says she served as the youth liaison between her students and the Town, the businesses, and the community. “I helped digest the information about local politics, grant writing, RFPs, etc. into palatable chunks for them to understand and carry out,” she explains. “It’s important that these kids’ voices are being heard.”

While Vanvalkenburg says that this three-year endeavor was a lot of work, it was also fun and worth it. “I am grateful for all the people who worked with the students, guided their learning, and donated their time, money, and materials. It has been an invaluable experience for all of us.”

Vanvalkenburg adds, “Skateboarding is a tight community and now we have a free and accessible hub that fosters skills that are applicable to other aspects of life. It’s so cool that, as a result of hard work from a lot of people, our community can enjoy an improved skatepark.” **MTN**



In April, Vanvalkenburg and students from the SK8 Gypsum organization participated in the groundbreaking for the new skatepark.



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