



RUTLAND RESTAURATEUR DONALD Billings plans to open his new River Pub & Grill in the former Sully's building next month after months of renovation. Contributed photo

Jack-of-all-trades and master of many finds his niche in the classroom

Devon Karpak's road to becoming OV's Tech Ed teacher

By **LEE J. KAHRS**

BRANDON — A key tenet of discovery and invention is trial and error. The same can be said for finding one's true calling. Welcome to Devon Karpak's life.

A walk through the basement-level tech education department at Otter Valley Union High School highlights the many sides of Karpak. You'll see a post-and-beam frame for an 8 x 14-foot tiny house, piles of lumber, a new table saw, an old table saw, small motors, rocket components, a new 3-D printer, an old 3-D printer.

His goal? Ten tech ed classes. He's teaching 3-D printing right now, as well as a "Motors, Myths and History" course with Brandon-based historian Kevin Thornton.



DEVON KARPAK

He's planning a small engine repair course for next fall, which is also when the tiny house will

be finished.

Karpak has applied for a grant to fund a welding program next fall as well.

"Apparently, my crazy brain is creating enthusiasm," he said with a chuckle. "It's a program where kids can try different things out and see if they fit."

Karpak exudes enthusiasm for his work. Which is probably what makes him so popular at OV.

His assessment?

"I come off sometimes as a grumpy, crazy uncle, but that's the special sauce I bring to it."

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

The 32-year-old Ripton native is a product of the Middlebury school system and the Hanaford Career Center. He took

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Karpak

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classes in computer science at Middlebury College while still in high school and learned diesel mechanics at the career center.

He remembers how eager he was to move on from high school.

"I kind of couldn't figure out why everything was so boring," he said. That's when the notion that education should be interesting began to take hold in Karpak.

He went on to graduate from WyoTech, a top-notch automotive vocational school in Blairsville, Pa., with certification in automotive and street rod fabrication.

Karpak then attended the University of Vermont majoring in mechanical engineering... and lasted one semester.

"I was like, this sucks, this is horrible," he said. "It was not for me."

He went to work for Dock Doctors in Ferrisburgh for awhile, then at a garage in New Haven. In his spare time, he helped build the biomass energy plant at Middlebury College.

A few years transpired and Karpak matured. He decided to give UVM another go, this time majoring in anthropology with a minor in chemistry while pursuing pre-medical school required classes. He graduated with a bachelor's

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degree and started applying to medical schools. The process was daunting, and Karpak began to realize that perhaps he was not cut out for the medical field.

"The process is designed for people who shouldn't be doctors to be doctors," he said.

Karpak parlayed this time into a

Public Health degree from UVM. He then became a phlebotomist (someone who draws blood from patients), then a licensed nursing assistant, then a long-term high school teaching substitute.

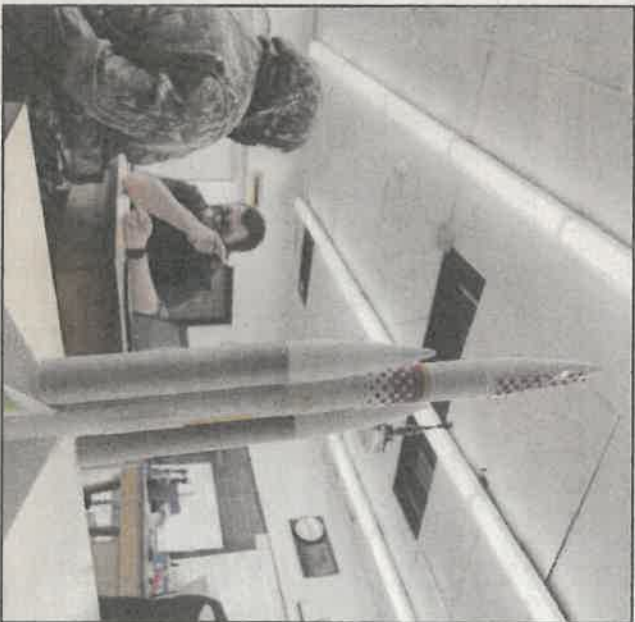
In 2014, Karpak was finally accepted to Lake Erie Medical School. He would study osteopathic medicine, which takes a more holistic approach to medicine, treating the whole person rather than the individual systems that make up the human body.

It didn't take long before Karpak was re-evaluating his choice.

"I made a hard stop and re-evaluated," he said. "I was gaining weight. I was thinking, 'Four more years, then three more years. I don't want to go.'"

So, he didn't. Karpak took a job teaching welding and mechanics at Missisquoi Union High School in Swanton and was there for two years. He then wanted to be bit closer to home and took a job teaching forestry and natural resources at Randolph High School.

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OTTER VALLEY TECH ed teacher Devon Karpak talks to student Caden Munger about his 3D printing project during a recent class.

Karpak



ONE OF DEVON Karpak's students assembles a rocket that would eventually be shot a few hundred feet into the air.

Contributed photo

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Karpak came back to the Middlebury area when he became the director of the Addison Central Teens center, a place he knew well having worked there twice before as an intern.

And then, the tech education job at Otter Valley opened up and Karpak got it, after a very circuitous route. He wouldn't have it any other way and says it would not have been possible had he taken a more direct path.

(Danish philosopher) Kierkegaard said, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." Karpak said, explaining that had it been any other way, "I would not be able to do all the things in this program."

THE DIFFERENCE

Karpak is currently teaching a 3-D printing course and an observer sees one student being a bit difficult. The teacher's level of patience is remarkable. He tries several different tasks before achieving his goal with the student.

"This isn't about me, this is about the kids and the opportunities they have. I'm just here to make sure they're safe and learning things to make decisions

about their future.

"It starts here," he added, "because not every kid plays sports, and not every season."

Karpak credits his time at Addison Central Teens for giving him the perspective and the ability to get to know kids on their level in their own environment.

"I learned things at the teen center that would drastically change the way teachers work with kids," he said. "It completely changes the way you see things."

Part of that is not only offering students the chance to make and create, but adult students as well. Karpak started a Maker's Space time in OV's tech ed department over the winter, offering students and staff members the chance to use the shop and equipment after school. Between late November 2020 and mid-March 2021, he recorded 135 visits by 37 people.

"Some projects were for class, but others were just for them," he said. "Then other kids came in and built things like a shelf for an Xbox. And the staff really, really enjoyed it and used the time."

He plans to hold another Maker's Space this fall at the school and open it up to community members as well.

"The time is right to continue building community in different

ways," he said. "Because we're people and we have interests and we can share. Those connections are as, if not more, important than during school. Staff interactions at different levels at different points in our lives and being a different presence is important."

With OV alum Jason Davis and Megan Martin, Karpak started a podcast at the school this year. It's still in its infancy, but the group plans to add a weekly news component to the podcast.

Karpak is deconstructing tech ed's reputation, one student at a time, while creating his own holistic approach to teaching.

"I'm hoping this is a culture, that they understand that this is a place of creation and innovation and ownership and that students are empowered and feel welcome," he said.

His commitment to that cause is nothing shy of admirable, particularly in this time of pandemic learning. He's doing his own version, while also pursuing another master's degree in career and technical education through SUNY Oswego.

"I am beholden to these kids," he said. "Every year we're not given the opportunity to explore their futures and growing skills, we have failed."