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Communal sports gear locker built by student



Adam Schmitt committed to operating the communal shed until he graduates from Granville High School, at which point he hopes to pass the torch to one of his younger brothers. PROVIDED BY JAMES BROWDER

Granville eighth-grader develops concept for class and fundraises to make it a reality

Emmet Anderson TheReportingProject.org

Adam Schmitt loves sports. • "If I had to give a percentage," the Granville Middle School student said, "at least 25% of my life is sports." • Schmitt, currently in eighth grade, said most of the friends he's made have come through sports. He grew up playing and coaching alongside his three brothers and his parents. • And now, he's using sports to give back to his community through In The Zone, a project developed for the Experiential Learner Mastermind course at GMS. **See PROJECT, Page 2A**

Report: Allegations against teachers pension fund director unfounded

Laura A. Bischoff

State Bureau | USA TODAY NETWORK

State Teachers Retirement System Executive Director Bill Neville sometimes tells old stories and raises his voice at work but he's not throwing furniture, degrading women, retaliating against critics or creating a hostile workplace, investigators concluded.

An anonymous letter purporting to be from STRS staff accused Neville of violence, harassment and other misconduct. The STRS Board placed Neville on paid leave in November while an outside law firm investigated the allegations.

A five-page executive summary of the investigation said the accusations are "largely without merit." Two experienced employment law attorneys interviewed 23 STRS employees who have regular contact with Neville as well as two former pension fund employees.

Attorneys David Kessler and Stephen Postalakis concluded that the anonymous letter contained multiple untrue allegations.

They found that some employees think Neville has a tendency to raise his voice when he's angry. And some reported that Neville likes to re-tell old stories that reference past girlfriends, but the stories didn't rise to the level of creating a hostile work environment, they concluded.

Kessler and Postalakis didn't uncover who wrote the anonymous letter.

See UNFOUNDED, Page 2A



Neville

Severed finger found in Walmart parking lot, Ohio police investigating

Cole Behrens

Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

The Sidney, Ohio, police department is looking for answers after a mysterious human finger was found in the parking lot of a local Walmart.

On Sunday, Feb. 18, Sidney police responded to the Sidney Walmart after someone discovered an amputated finger in the parking lot, according to the city Facebook page. Officers located the finger and sent it to the Montgomery County Coroner's Office at which point it was confirmed that the finger was in fact a human finger, likely a white female's.

No nearby medical providers can provide information that links the finger to any recent patient, the

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Project

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The course, an elective led by English teacher James Browder, is designed to inspire students to make their communities better.

"I asked the superintendent, 'What if we do a whole class around this where we tell kids that what they care about matters, and then give them time and space in the day to be a changemaker?'" Browder said. "And it's been insane. I mean, it's just been super cool."

Schmitt's project, In The Zone, is "basically a Goodwill for sports," he explained. He created a shed, located in Raccoon Valley Park in Granville, that serves as a shared storage space for sports equipment. Residents with unused or old sports equipment can donate it to the shed, and folks who can't afford to buy the gear brand-new — a sometimes-prohibitive cost that often makes sports inaccessible to low-income families — can use it as needed.

"Whatever I got had to be passed down to all my brothers, and most of it was still in really good condition," Schmitt said. "So I figured, if most two-kid families have equipment that they only use twice and it's still in really good condition, then why not? Why can't other people use it for free? It's not necessary to pay \$300 for a bat that you're only going to use for a year."

The shed sits on a structure once meant for a port-a-potty, but it sat vacant for more than 20 years. When Schmitt first arrived, it was essentially a cube, with one side missing.

"We had to put the wall, put on the door and then build shelves and furnish the inside," Schmitt said.

Schmitt needed additional funding to help bring his idea to fruition, so he applied for a grant from the Michael Dean Gibbs Foundation. Michael Dean Gibbs, a former Granville resident, died from Lou Gehrig's disease — also known as ALS or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis — in 2018, and his family created the foundation in his honor. Among the family is Mariah Gibbs, Michael's sister-in-law and Schmitt's kindergarten teacher.

The spring rolled into summer, and Schmitt hadn't gotten the grant yet. The class ended, but his heart was still invested in the project. Schmitt spent his summer on Zoom calls with the foundation, pitching his plan.

"It was very definitely nerve-wracking because I've never been a part of anything like that before," Schmitt said. "Mr. Browder told me, 'Hey, the class is over. If you want to just cut it off here,

we can just cut it off.' But I said no. And, I mean, here we are."

Schmitt received a \$1,500 grant from the foundation in the fall of 2023 and immediately got to work building. Some of the money went towards construction costs, but much of it went toward buying sports equipment for the shed.

Though he purchased some equipment, Schmitt said most of the equipment — baseball gloves and bats, helmets, shin guards and cleats — has come from local donors.

In his grant proposal, Schmitt committed to taking care of the shed, keeping it stocked and clean until he graduates high school in 2028. And hopefully, Schmitt said, one of his younger brothers will take over running the shed after that.

Schmitt has already been in talks with the Granville Recreation District, but he plans to reach out to all of the local recreational districts in Licking County for their help advertising.

"My favorite part is seeing how it changed from just an idea to a whole shed full of equipment that's going to help the community," Schmitt said. "The community that is willing to donate all of their hard-earned money to help other people play sports."

Browder worked with Schmitt to develop his project, bringing it from the idea phase inside a classroom into reality.

"There's a clip of one of his Zoom calls that I recorded, where he's talking to the Michael Dean Gibbs Foundation, and he said, 'I can't imagine some kid not being able to go out and play a sport that I get to play and love so much just because they don't have access to equipment,'" Browder said. "Those are the moments that I hope kids are having when we're sending them out into the world and we're giving them the opportunity and space to do something about the things that they care about."

Browder's Experiential Learner Mastermind class has helped students develop projects across Licking County, and encourages students to approach issues with curiosity, creativity, philanthropy and entrepreneurship.

As a result of the class, Granville Middle School students have developed plantable journals made entirely from recycled materials, created a business for healthy dog treats, and helped place free and accessible menstrual products in several Granville restaurants.

Emmet Anderson writes for TheReportingProject.org, the nonprofit news organization of Denison University's Journalism program, which is funded by the Mellon Foundation and donations from readers.



Schmitt stocked the shelves in the shed with new equipment, as well as donated used equipment. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY JAMES BROWDER



When Schmitt first acquired the shed, it was basically a cube with one side missing. He added a wall and a door before furnishing the inside.



Though the shed is located in Granville, Schmitt hopes residents across Licking County will rely on it.

the investigation found no evidence of unlawful behavior by Neville. It is even suggested that the false claims may have originated from someone external to STRS. Despite this, the author of the false email remains unidentified, and the STRS Board has yet to reinstate Mr. Neville, who should promptly resume his role as executive director to continue his commendable work for Ohio's teachers."

STRS Ohio is governed by an 11-member board that includes appointees and elected members. The board oversees \$90 billion invested for 500,000 teachers and retirees. Activists have been mounting a board takeover, electing board members who are more sympathetic to their complaints about transparency, senior leadership, staff bonuses, and the suspension of the cost-of-living allowances for retirees. Some of

the reformers have called for Neville to be ousted. Neville, who makes \$318,000 a year, has been director for nearly four years and an STRS employee for nearly two decades.

Laura Bischoff is a reporter for the USA TODAY Network Ohio Bureau, which serves the Columbus Dispatch, Cincinnati Enquirer, Akron Beacon Journal and 18 other affiliated news organizations across Ohio.

Unfounded

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Despite being told that the allegations were without merit, the STRS board opted to keep Neville on paid leave through mid-May and offer him performance coaching in the meantime.

Neville's attorney, Rex Elliott, said "...

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