

The Closter Nature Center's community fire pit, across Ruckman Pond from the center's cabin has had a complete renovation thanks to Boys Scouts in Closter's Troop 63. Led by Rupert Bowen, who envisioned the improvement and pitched it as his Eagle Scout project, the work has completely changed the look and feel of the fire pit.

Rupert, 15, a recent Closter resident, quickly became involved in volunteer work at the Nature Center as part of the public service requirements required to achieve Life Scout rank. He patrolled fenced areas in the preserve, which were erected to monitor and compare the regrowth of native species with unfenced areas, once grazing and antler rubbing by deer were eliminated. Weekly patrols are needed to ensure the fence remains undamaged from falling branches and trees.

Rupert's family joined in with him on these patrols, with his mother, Sarah, and sister, Jemima, often accompanying him on the circuits.

"I had done a lot of community work with the Audubon Society in California and wanted to continue once we moved here," Rupert explained. Now working towards the next level in Scouting, Eagle Scout, he needed to complete a project that was of benefit to the community. Improvement of some aspect of the CNC seemed a natural. The Eagle Scout project is undertaken by those who have achieved the rank of Life Scout, earned a total of 21 merit badges and met a number of other requirements. It is the highest rank a Boy Scout can achieve. In 2019, only eight percent of scouts qualified for that status.

"The project is the final hurdle to earning the rank," Rupert said. "It demonstrates leadership skills and the importance of giving back to the community." The scout is required to lead all aspects of the project:

coming up with a proposal, getting approval from the community organization it will serve, designing it, raising whatever funds are necessary, obtaining materials, and leading volunteer scouts in completing the actual construction.

At the start of 2021, Rupert approached Marc Gussen, CNC naturalist and director, to discuss possible projects within the preserve. After a few conversations about construction of a message kiosk and various trail repairs, they settled on the fire pit, which is also utilized by the Scouts. The site was a simple circle of stones and some cinder blocks for seating.

Planning started in late February. Rupert researched the design and layout of fire pits at other parks and recreation areas. “I started with the bench and table design,” Rupert said. “I’d like to be an engineer, and enjoy drawing and designing things, so this was right in my lane.” Rupert said his father, Sam, an electrical engineer at Peleton, “really influenced my approach to problem solving, designing and engineering.”

“After some preliminary designs, everything fell into place and I was able to begin sourcing the materials.” Rupert said. He contacted Closter landscape contractor James Crimmins, who owns a sawmill. Discussing the lumber choice with Crimmins, Rupert was able to obtain black locust tree trunks, a highly rot resistant species. These were cut to make round supports, or milled into long boards for the seating surfaces and tables. Crimmins donated the lumber and labor for this portion of the project.

Fund raising, an all-day car wash on 5 June, raised \$600 to purchase the balance of materials needed, the most expensive being the large

volume of pea stone needed for under the fire ring, as well as safety equipment for the scouts who participated in the build-out, assorted hardware for constructing eight benches capable of seating 16 people, and two large tables.

Once materials were assembled, work took place on June 20<sup>th</sup>. Under Rupert's direction, this involved troop leaders and 20 scouts, who provided the labor needed to move wood into place, dig holes for bench supports, erect tables and benches, and spread pea stone under the larger stones that surround the fire.

Tom Golodik, a CNC trustee on the Natural Resources committee, said Rupert's project provided a huge improvement to this area of the preserve. "We are trying to add walking paths to the Mayer Loop and provide accessibility to a previously unused area very near the fire pit. Rupert has made the circle an inviting location for group meetings and nature center activities. He's done a wonderful job and the Nature Center's board of trustees appreciate the work and effort that went into this."