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New leash on life

Middlefield dog park the brainchild of local Eagle Scout

Scout barks up right trees to create dog park

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WEEKEND CORRESPONDENT

They say the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. That certainly rings true for Charlie, Bailey, Eli and Busby — four lab mixes who can now rollick to their hearts' content in Middlefield's new dog park.

The dog park, which is nestled on Besek Mountain on a piece of land called The King Property, is the Eagle Scout project of 15-year-old Tyler Sibley, a Middlefield resident. Sibley achieved the highest rank of the Boy Scouts by demonstrating responsibility and leadership, completing 21 of the 120 possible merit badges, and completing a project that benefits others.

Sibley's idea for the project was sparked when his father's friends recommended that he check out the dog park in Wethersfield. He was thinking of his dog, Charlie, as he observed that it was a perfect place for dogs to play with each other, and for their owners to socialize. And then he mused, "Why should the people of Middlefield have to drive all this way for a dog park? I need a project, and if this doesn't work, I can try something else."

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In the spring of 2008, he began the arduous task of seeking approval for the project from his scoutmaster, the first selectman of Middlefield, the Conservation Commission, the Parks and Recreation Commission, Planning and Zoning, the Inland Wetlands Commission and the Board of Selectman. Final approval was given in September 2008, with the understanding that no money would be received from the town. There was no opposition because there are no wetlands involved, and its location benefits the most people, since the small lots of the surrounding houses are not conducive to exercising one's dog.

"Every step of the way, I was a part of this," Sibley said. "I got the approval, I did the fundraising, I designed the park."

But he would also be the first to tell you that this project, which was completed in July 2009, is the result of many helping hands. In the spring of 2008, he formed the Middlefield Dog Owners' Group

— a group of 20 dog owners who wanted to help with the project, and who are known as Mi-Dog — and he says they helped all the way with getting the approvals and with the fundraising.

The townsfolk proved to be invaluable. A petition, which was signed by several hundred people, was brought to town meetings to show the magnitude of support.

Businesses donated material for fundraisers and put out collection cans, and there were close to 200 donations from businesses and individuals in Durham and Middlefield. Between the contributions and the fundraisers, \$18,000 was raised.

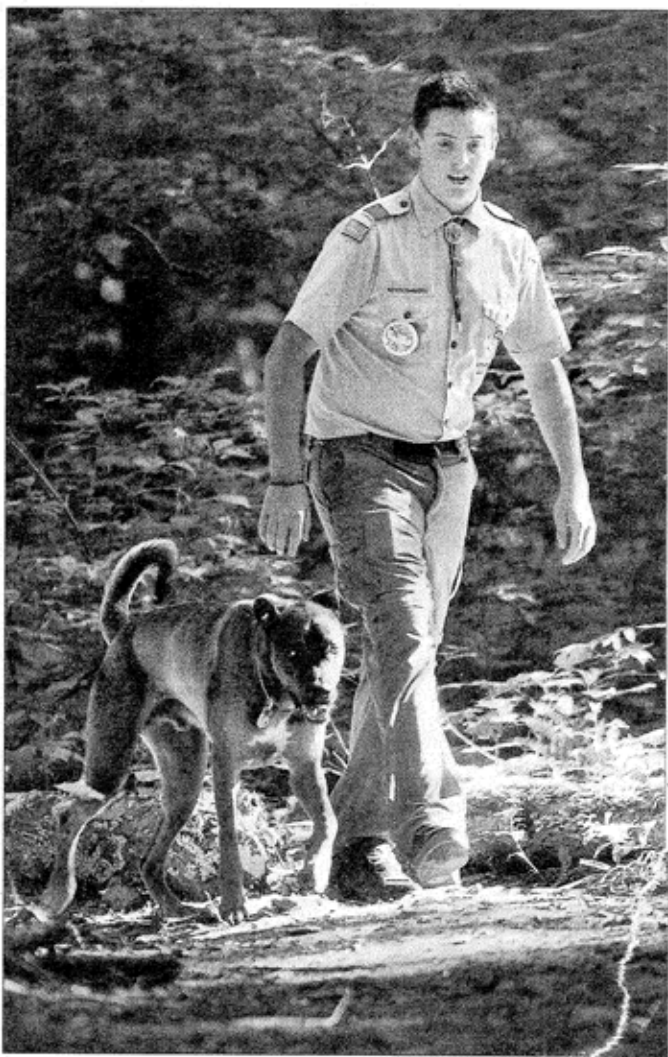
The fences were installed professionally, but Mi-Dog, the Boy Scouts and Sibley did all the rest of work at the park. They assembled benches, cleared paths, put down mulch, etc.

The park, which is open to everyone, is maintained 100 percent by volunteers. It consists of about one acre of woodland that is enclosed in a 5-foot-tall chain link fence, with separate areas for the large and small dogs. Each area has two metal bowls for water brought in by owners for their dogs. There are benches, doggie bag dispensers, a bulletin board posting the rules, pathways and a trash can at the exit. There's a policy of carrying out what you carried in, including your dog's waste, but the trash can is for people who may not have read the rules. Quips Sibley's mother, Pam, "The dogs carry in the waste, and the people carry it out."

Sibley said, "This project means a lot to me because I stuck with it and saw it through to the end, and I didn't stop working because it got too hard. Having the dog park is a big accomplishment on my part. It's a good story I can tell my kids someday."

And the project means a lot to others, as well. George and Livia Jacobs, members of Mi-Dog who donated their time and support, are delighted with the outcome, as are their canine companions, Bailey, Eli and Busby. Livia said, "Exercised dogs make better neighbors. They're tired when they go home, and they don't bother people."

"And then there's the socializing. Every time I go I



Tyler Sibley, a scout with Troop 33 and his 4-year-old dog, Charlie, a Labrador mix, walk through a path at the Mi-Dog Park Wednesday. Sibley raised \$18,000 to construct the park on Mattabesek Road in Middlefield.

meet somebody new. I don't go to the grocery store or the mall and talk to people, but at the dog park, we all stand around and chit chat. It's a good family event."

"The dogs love it, she said. "They know when they're getting close to the dog park, and they start to cry. After we park the car, they drag us up the path to the entrance. And when it's time to go, they don't want to leave, and then we have to drag them back to the car. When they get home, they sleep, which means we get to sleep through the night instead of them getting us up at the crack of dawn. So I'd have to say the park is really for people."

For more information, e-mail midog@comcast.net.