

For Immediate Release
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GIG HARBOR, WA – Harbor WildWatch is honored to be the recipient of a \$25,000 grant from the Windows of Hope Foundation through the Gary E. Milgard Foundation.

Gary and Carol Milgard, and their children, created the Gary E. Milgard Foundation in 2000. The Milgard family shares a deep interest and commitment to philanthropy, and in 2016 they reorganized and distributed its funds into four new foundations, including Windows of Hope. Today, these foundations award grants to organizations that work to impact their Pierce County communities in a positive way.

The \$25,000 grant award will directly support classroom workshops and after-school programs that focus on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) in the 2018-2019 school year. The Harbor Outreach Program (HOP) consists of 20 classroom lessons that inspire a love for STEM learning in elementary and middle school students. Similarly, the After-School STEM Club (STEM Club) offers six weeks of workshops that are unique, fun, and build curiosity around STEM careers.

In addition to delivering these student workshops, this grant will also provide Harbor WildWatch with the support needed to improve their evaluation method in HOP and STEM Club. In 2017, Milgard funding permitted Harbor WildWatch to pilot a new evaluation technique using a variation of the popular ‘Escape Room’ concept.

“Our former evaluations were time consuming for the teachers and students, and they often didn’t yield good information about retention,” explains Education Director Rachel Easton. “The idea came up to model a new tool based on Escape Rooms. We thought – why can’t we create one that works in the classroom as an evaluation method?”

The “Rock Lock Box” is designed to test the students’ retention of workshop content in a group setting. It’s comprised of a series of interactive clues and codes that quiz students on what they learned during previous lessons. Students use their critical thinking skills to unlock a total of eight boxes by decoding clues through a variety of experiments and deciphering messages written in invisible ink.

“What I really love about the Lock Box is the enthusiasm of the kids who participate. They don’t realize they are taking a test,” says Easton.

Tyler Zemanek, Program Officer at the Windows of Hope Foundation, had a chance to test his own knowledge using this innovative tool on a recent visit to the Harbor WildWatch office.

“After experiencing the Rock Lock Box firsthand, I was excited about the potential for it to be an engaging and effective model to evaluate students. Without a doubt it’s the most fun I’ve had testing my knowledge of geology,” says Zemanek.

The Milgard funding for the 2018-2019 school year will enable Harbor WildWatch to build a Lock Box for their three other workshop series: Water, Life, and Advanced Life. A fourth Lock Box will be designed for their most popular STEM Club series, “It’s for the Birds,” and will serve as a pilot evaluation for the multi-aged program. The funding will also allow for further expansion of these two programs into the Tacoma and Clover Park school districts.

Since 2004, Harbor WildWatch has offered low or no-cost environmental education to inspire the future stewards of the Salish Sea and Puget Sound. Today they offer over 600 programs yearly. With this grant, Harbor WildWatch will have the opportunity to inspire over 7,000 young students, many of whom are in low-income Pierce County schools.

Harbor WildWatch believes that offering HOP and STEM Club programs with an effective evaluation technique to students in traditionally underserved neighborhoods is the next step in providing equitable STEM learning in our region. In the future, they hope to make this unique tool available to teachers in surrounding school districts.

Harbor WildWatch is a 501(c)(3) non-profit environmental education organization based in Gig Harbor, WA. Their mission is to inspire stewardship for Puget Sound by providing learning opportunities about the environment to the people in the local community. Through more than 600 fun and interactive programs each year, Harbor WildWatch hopes to inform residents and visitors about local marine life and elicit their involvement in preserving our natural resources. To make a donation or learn more about Harbor WildWatch, visit www.harborwildwatch.org.