



El  
Senior Profile  
2020-2021

LEAF Charter School senior El Martinez says, “I first found out about LEAF when my sister saw (founding director and art teacher) Dakota Benedetto sitting at a LEAF booth at an event in Alstead. Dakota had been my sister’s art teacher. So we went up to the LEAF booth and started talking with her. After we talked, my mom said, ‘Why don’t you go to LEAF?’ I didn’t want to go by myself so I talked my best friend into going with me.”

Reflecting back on all her experiences at school, LEAF’s unique Food and Garden program provided El with some of her favorite memories. LEAF’s lunch program is part of the curriculum, so lunch is free for all students. Students have a hand in planning gardens, growing food, meal planning, cooking, serving meals, and cleaning up. El remembers the first day of school: “We were served tacos in real china bowls and glass plates and we had lunch outside at picnic tables. That first day was super cool.” She has enjoyed being a part of the kitchen crew talking with friends and preparing the meals.

Other favorite memories include experiences El had learning outdoors. “We get to do a lot of things outdoors.” She remembers one specific activity from her first year. LEAF partnered with Kroka Expeditions and Kroka director Nathan Lyczak led a navigation class. “We were broken up into teams and we had to find our team’s flags in the woods. It was really fun to run around and find our way.”

The staff at LEAF has been very supportive. Founding director Dakota Benedetto has really made a difference in El's life. "Dakota has been there for me. I know I can always go to her. She has been there for me for the last 4 years. She is a busy person, but sometimes she will still just come over and sit with me and we talk."

The variety of art classes EL has taken at LEAF have been some of her favorite classes. In El's 2-D art class, she remembers Dakota had students stand on a table and strike a pose. Then the students had to draw the model. "Dakota taught me about proportion and how to draw human bodies. Dakota would also arrange objects and we would draw them using oil pastels. I had never used oil pastels before so it was super fun to use something I had never used before." Another art assignment that was meaningful to El was to think of something you really enjoy and how you feel when you are engaging with that activity. She had to take that emotion and turn it into something 3-D. El used her skateboard, which "I use to relax and be my stress relief. I created little monsters to represent stress and bad things. I then drew a picture of me skating away from the little monsters."

Dakota is able to create a safe environment to give and receive criticism. "Whenever we had art we wanted to share, we would set our art up so everyone could see and then everyone would give feedback. We would give positive feedback and share ideas about how to make it better. It was a positive experience. My art definitely improved."

After graduation, El is thinking about becoming a cosmetologist or a tattoo artist. She is interested in having an apprenticeship with hands-on learning. Right now she is working at a job she really loves at The Hungry Diner in Walpole.

El leaves these words of wisdom to future LEAF students: "Always feel comfortable going to teachers if you need help with academics or personal stuff. Sometimes people think it is hard to reach out to a teacher, but not at LEAF. AND...keep up with your work as much as possible."

LEAF is a special place. "The building and surroundings are different. School is like a big barn building with machines, bean bags, and bouncy balls to sit on. Teachers are easy to talk to. We are all comfortable with each other. The school work is more hands-on. For example in our first year history class, we made a giant timeline and all worked on it together. Each student added our own artistic touch." At LEAF, I have been "able to make good decisions. I have never done anything bad because the people I am with are good people. When you're with good people you do good things. At LEAF, I have been surrounded by really good people."

