TEWKSBURY — It's summer. While others are thinking about beaches, 25 young adults, their parents, and the leadership of the Tewksbury Adaptive Ski Club are thinking snow. And why not?

Since 2006, this group activity has been providing the students of the special education and life skills programs at Tewksbury Memorial High School with an opportunity to have fun and enjoy accomplishments at the same time.

Again this winter, they will conquer the mountain as they prove their mental and physical courage to themselves and to others. The ski club was founded by special education teacher Patrick Galligan and a team of supportive individuals from many sources.

Galligan was inspired by his experience serving as a chaperone for adaptive skier Lisa Poore. In spite of any challenges, the then eighth grade student was already skiing. It was something Poore started with her family.

“We’d try things to see if she liked them,” said her mother, Joanne Poore. “We thought, ‘Let’s just see if she enjoys it.’” Lisa’s parents and her brother Michael had already been skiing with her for years. She loves it. When she went to middle school, Lisa joined the ski club. It was the perfect opportunity for her to be with her peers. But she needed a dedicated chaperone, so Galligan eagerly stepped in.
“I skied with her for eight weeks, and I didn’t want to lose that,” he explained. “I knew this was something we had to do for others.” Together with the school system and the parents of that first group in 2006, he made it happen.

At first, he just made it a class goal to go skiing. He explained, “We went on St. Patrick’s Day to Wachusetts Mountain, and it went very well.” The ski program flourished and has expanded to four day trips a year and a weekend trip which includes families.

He was quick to point out the extensive help he has had from others especially fellow special education teacher Anne McGregor-Faye who is a fundamental partner in all of the ski club activities. Faye has the huge responsibility of running the 9-12 grades part of the TMHS “SpecEd” program.

Galligan runs LEAP, the Life Skills Exploratory Access Program, which focuses on the next step after high school whether they go straight to work or on to another adult training program.

Galligan, Faye and the parents receive unwavering support from the school administration and the school committee. For example, there is an end-of-season sports banquet for them complete with trophies. The ski team also has its own banner in the school gymnasium, a visible reminder of the way they meet and conquer challenges every day.

In fact, if you visit Donna’s Donuts on Main Street, you will see another visible reminder of the ski team and their accomplishments.

Through the collective efforts of the parents of skiers Mary Wilson and Janelle Tetrault, there is a huge ski team mural on the wall there.

The two young ladies have been friends since sixth grade. Janelle’s mom, Laura Tetrault, is an artist. She worked with Mary’s parents, Guidi and Bill Wilson, the donut shop owners, to paint the mural of the ski club there at Donna’s Donuts.

It features the ski lift on the Mount Sunapee slope where the club now trains and skis. “It’s the central point where all the kids and parents gather,” said Tetrault.

The work also includes the lodge and the New England Handicapped Ski Association (NEHSA) buildings. NEHSA’s Angela Nielson and her team of trained volunteers are integral to the ski team experiences at the southern New Hampshire resort.

Perhaps the most important feature is that each child is included in the mural and they are shown with their own ski coats.

“I got photos and matched up their own jackets to what I was painting,” Tetrault said. Much care, love and attention went into her work. The young skiers are definitely an inspiration.
While it is true that the kids “max out” age wise at 25 for the ski club, the option is there to continue after graduation. It is a tight community, and this aspect is important to all involved. All they have to do to continue is to support fund raising.

“Although we are a recognized school activity, we don’t get financial support as a club,” explains Galligan. “So we need to raise our own money, because skiing is an expensive sport, and then there’s the specialized equipment and lessons.”

To that end, they sell Christmas wreaths at the Fall Apple Festival Craft Fair held at TMHS, and they have held raffles featuring Celtics games tickets and dinner. There is a lot of community support.

Galligan said he was thrilled and appreciative for all help he received right from the start, especially from the parents. Now in its tenth year, he said, “I could never do it alone.”

“To see the kids grow and change is amazing,” said Tetrault. “They could have walked away, but they didn’t.”

She told stories of watching them, at first looking up at the mountain trails with expressions that said “You want me to do what!” and then seeing them later, with big smiles, skiing down the harder trails.

Guidi Wilson recalls when she was told about the program. “I thought it was crazy,” she giggled. “My daughter Mary and Janelle were the two in wheel chairs.” She didn’t know what to think then, but now she thinks the program is amazing.

“I hate the cold,” the dedicated and happy mom said. “But I stand out there for three hours watching the smiles on every single one of them.” Wilson loves the way skiing gives them a freedom they don’t have elsewhere. “I bundle up,” she said. “I can’t not watch; I love it.”

To learn more about the club and their activities and to see announcements for fund raising events, visit the Lifeskills Leap Facebook page which features the Tewksbury adaptive ski program.