

# The Laurel Highlands Explorers





# The Laurel Highlands Explorers



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This book is dedicated to all young explorers around the globe.

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Yes! The day had finally arrived: the end of the year field trip to the Johnstown Area Heritage Discovery Center. A classroom of fourth graders, eager with anticipation for today's trip, spilled out of the schoolbus and raced toward the double doors of the museum.

“Find another student or two to buddy-up with for the day,” their teacher called after them.

The children scattered like leaves after a gust of wind. Most of them joined friends, laughing and socializing. Several of the students did not find buddies quite so easily.

“I’d rather be here than sitting in class any day. I’m ready to explore,” said Maeve, a blonde-haired girl with a pixie dusting of freckles across her nose and cheeks. “I just hope I can be left alone to do my own thing,” she continued quietly.

Miles, a tall boy with jet black hair who wore his set of trusty headphones and a set of very thick-lensed glasses, hesitated a bit as he walked. Being ever so careful with his footing, he hesitated in the entryway. Once inside, he tentatively found an open area, and walked right past Maeve without noticing her. *Music, to the rescue*, thought Miles as he lowered his eyes, sure that no one would choose him to buddy-up. *Stay calm and cool...don’t let them see you care*, he thought.

Mia, a cheerful girl with long braided brown hair and big brown eyes, was the school’s newest student. She spied Maeve and Miles. “Well, I guess we’re it,” Mia said as she shrugged and stepped beside them.

“Hi! I’m Mia! What’s your name?”



Averting her eyes, Maeve replied, "I'm Maeve."  
Miles put his headphones over his ears.  
The teacher, carrying her clipboard, stopped by the group. "Miles, Mia and Maeve, you've decided to buddy-up? Splendid! I'll make note of this on my chart," she said, then scurried away to begin leading the students through the museum.

Maeve, curious about all of the displays, let her eyes wander across all of the exhibits.

Miles found a spot off to the side and closed his eyes, escaping with the music that played in his headphones.

Mia's eye caught something...strange. A display was glowing and floating. She grabbed both Maeve and Miles by the wrists and pulled them along, not toward the crowd of the other students now disappearing around an exhibit corner, but toward the glimmering, shimmering display that had caught her eye.

"So what do you think?" said a voice next to them. Like the tetherball game that spins during playground time at school, all three children spun toward the voice.

"I'm Mike, the curator of the museum," he said with a smile. "So what do you think of that one?"

The children looked back at the table display. A map, curled at the edges seemed to hover atop the table.

"I don't know," said Maeve. "It looked interesting at first, but now I see that the map is blank, which makes it pretty useless then."





Mia chimed in, “Yeah. The sign says that this is a map of our region, but there’s nothing on it.”

Miles, adjusted his headphones, listened from one ear, peered between their shoulders, and squinted to see.

Curator Mike smiled. “Ahh...so it is. Why might that be?”

*Phew! I thought it was just me who couldn't see anything on the map.* Miles thought to himself.

Maeve bent down to look under the map's edges. Mia followed, also curious about why a blank map would be so special.

“So what's the map for?” asked Mia.

“What's any map for?” responded Curator Mike.

“To show you all the routes or ways you can take to get somewhere,” said Maeve.

“But it's blank,” whispered Miles.

“Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't. Sometimes people see things differently. Sometimes what we see is based on what we know. Or don't know.” said Curator Mike.

Curator Mike pulled open a narrow drawer from under the edge of the table and gently lifted out a small metal object.

“That looks like my grampy's pocket watch. He doesn't use it to tell time anymore,” said Maeve.

“Ahh, yes,” said Curator Mike. “This is like that, only it's not a pocketwatch. It's a compass. It doesn't tell time, it tells direction.”



Nudging closer to the group, Miles pulled his second headphone slightly off his ear.

“So it tells you where to go?” asked Mia.

“The compass helps you find the places that need your explorer powers the most,” explained Curator Mike.



“Look!” Maeve gasped, looking at the map. “Do you all see that?”

“It’s a compass! It just appeared! How’d you do that?” Mia shouted.

“I didn’t do it,” answered Curator Mike, “YOU did.”

“We did?” asked Miles.

“You did,” he smiled. “At first you saw a blank map. Since then, you showed curiosity: learning about the compass. You showed responsibility: willingness to understand its importance. You showed empowerment: belief in your own ability to see differently based on your new understanding. With curiosity, responsibility and empowerment, a whole new world and a whole different future becomes open to you. You now see the map in a new way.”

“Now remember this,” he continued, “the only way to know where to go is to understand where you’ve been, and where you will be.” Curator Mike closed the drawer, handed Miles the compass, and turned away.

The children chattered. “How can we see more?” asked Mia.

“What else can we learn that opens up the map?” asked Miles.

“What can we do to make it different?” asked Maeve. And with their questions wafting in the air...

**RuMble...FLASH! ZzZzp.**

Mia, Miles and Maeve disappeared.



The children suddenly appeared in front of a house with a sign that read Wagner Ritter. Curator Mike, the museum and their classmates had disappeared.

“Where in the world are we?” questioned Mia, confused.

“Wow. This place is really old!” said Maeve excitedly as she surveyed the facade, or front of the house.

“Let’s check out to see if our classmates and teacher went in there!” said Mia excitedly.

“I’m not so sure,” said Miles.

“I’m not afraid to explore,” said Maeve, placing her hand on the front door handle. “Let’s go!”



The interior of the house was filled with antiques. A plaque on the wall said:

*This house was restored by the Johnstown Area Heritage Association to resemble its original state during the height of industrialization and immigration in the late 19th and early 21st centuries.*

From above their heads, a small voice piped up,  
“Who’s there?”

“What was that?” asked Mia nervously.

“What are you kids doing here by yourselves?” the voice asked again.

“The picture is talking!” said Maeve.

“You can hear me!” said the picture. “I heard you reading the plaque. My family and I were immigrants who traveled to Johnstown from Germany. My father came here to find work. We traveled a long way on a ship all the way across the ocean,” said the girl in the picture.

“My family moved here from another country too! Who are you?” Mia asked. “Why are you here? Do all the pictures in this place talk?”





• Anna Ritter •

“I’m Anna Ritter,” the girl in the picture said cheerfully. “Are you children lost?”

“We don’t really know...” said Miles.

Maeve replied “One minute we were in the JAHA museum, and then we got a magical map and compass that brought us outside of this house.”

“What is this place anyhow?” Mia inquired.

“Oh! This is my house. My family and I lived here, worked here, and survived the terrible 1889 Flood.”

“A flood! Our basement got flooded once,” said Mia.

“Did water come down the streets?” asked Maeve.

“More than that...” Anna replied.

Anna recounted, “The water was THIRTEEN feet high when the South Fork Dam broke. My family, all nine of us, sought shelter upstairs. Suddenly, we heard someone outside yelling for help.”

“What did you do? Did you call the police?” asked Mia.

“Oh no,” said Anna. “They were all very busy. We opened the window and saw her floating in the water.”

“What!? The water was that high?” Mia questioned.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. My brothers and father used sheets and blankets to throw to her to help her get close enough to the window. Then we pulled her in and saved her.”



“WHOA,” said all three explorers.

“Did she live?” asked Mia.

“Sure thing! We became best friends and remained friends for many years after. We helped each other during the Great Depression years later when we were grownups.”

“The country had a money crisis and so we shared food, clothes and even toys for our own children.”

“You had toys? Like Playstations?” asked Maeve.

Anna advised, “Look around the house a bit, and you’ll see some dolls we made, like handkerchief mice we called moushka. There are also some wooden cars my father and brothers built. I believe they are in the parlor, well, you kids call it a living room.”

“There’s no TV in here! What did you do for fun?” asked Miles, who had already wandered into the living room.

“Well,” said Anna, “We read books, talked, sang, danced and listened to father play the accordion. We also tended to the garden. Go take a look!”

The children peered through the doorway, and stepped out into the backyard garden.

Suddenly, a rabbit peeked its head out of the lettuce patch. “Hey kids! Are you hungry? I’ll share my salad with you!” squeaked a small voice.



“Aw! What is your name little bunny?” asked Mia.

“My name is Nuts. I’ve lived here for many years,”  
replied the bunny.

“Did your ancestors experience the flood here, too?”  
Maeve asked.

“Yes, they did. Everyone ran into the forest to take  
cover,” replied the bunny.



“I’ve never been in the forest. I’d like to visit the forest,” said Miles.

Maeve pulled out the map. “It’s right there!” said Nuts.

“Is it north or west of here?” asked Miles, pulling out the compass.

“What can we do to prevent a flood like that and protect ourselves?” Mia added, still worried.

Suddenly, the map began to glow. Nuts smiled. “I remember when I was a baby bunny, there were birds, and even ott-...”

Suddenly the ground began to shake.

“Run for cover!” yelled Nuts, hopping from the garden.

“It shows where we’ve been, not where we will go,” said Miles.



The needle of the compass spun erratically. The door of the house slams shut. **RuMble, FLASH! Zzzzp...**the house, Anna & Nuts were gone.



With a bump, the children landed in a pile of dried leaves at the edge of the wood. Three sets of clenched eyelids popped open like a jack in the box.

“Woah, where are we?” Maeve asked.



“Looks like we’re near the forest,” Mia responded.

Miles lost his glasses in the fall. Separated from the others, he adjusted his headphones and started looking for his glasses. He thought: *I’m not sure where we are now, or why we are here, but it could have something to do with what Curator Mike said. We have the power to decide where to go...where we are needed most...*

“Maeve, check the map. Maybe we can figure out where we are,” suggested Mia.



A gust of wind pulled the map from Maeve's hands.

Mia and Maeve chased it while it floated just out of reach. Miles, unable to see, lagged behind while the girls ran. He wished that his eyes worked like the others. He wished he could lead the way like the others.

On hands and knees, panic-stricken, Miles began feeling around on the ground in front of him, frantically searching for his glasses.

Inching forward, patting the ground gently for his frames, Miles' hand disappeared into a dark hole. He began to hear his own heart thumping.

"If they've fallen into this hole," Miles whispered to himself, "I'll never get them back. They'll be lost forever..."

He heard one of the other explorers in the distance shout "Got it!"

*They must have found the map. Now I need to find my glasses,* Miles thought with resolve and determination.

With his face hovering over the mysterious hole, Miles' heart leapt from his chest with excitement as he found his glasses on the ground. He picked up his glasses and was face to face with a pair of eyes that glared at him from the darkness below.



“Ahh...it’s a beaver!” Miles chuckled, his heartbeat slowing a bit at the sight of the friendly creature.

“Excuuuuuse me? What did you just call me? I declare. I’m an otter, young man.”

“Ahhh...it’s a talking beaver, uhm...otter,” said Miles.

“What are you doing here by yourself? How can I help you?” asked the otter.

“Is this your home?” asked Miles.

“Yes, it is,” the otter declared proudly.

“It doesn’t look like much of a home to me,” Miles continued, “but I’ve never really been in the forest before.”

“My name is Oscar, and yes, you’re correct, it doesn’t look like much of a home now. Not anymore. Thanks to the humans.”

Two more sets of eyes blinked from within the den. Oscar clicked a high-pitch chatter, and two pups wiggled up against him.

“Is this a human?” asked one of the pups.



“Yes, but it seems to be a friendly one...” Oscar replied.

Mia’s voice rang through the air “Miles, where are you?”

“I’m over here!” Miles responded.



“We found the map!” Maeve shouted, breathless from the chase.

“And you found a family of beavers?” inquired Mia.  
“He’s an otter. Oscar the otter, and his pups” explained Miles.

“Are those the bad humans that destroyed our habitat, papa?” asked one of the pups, cowering behind her papa.

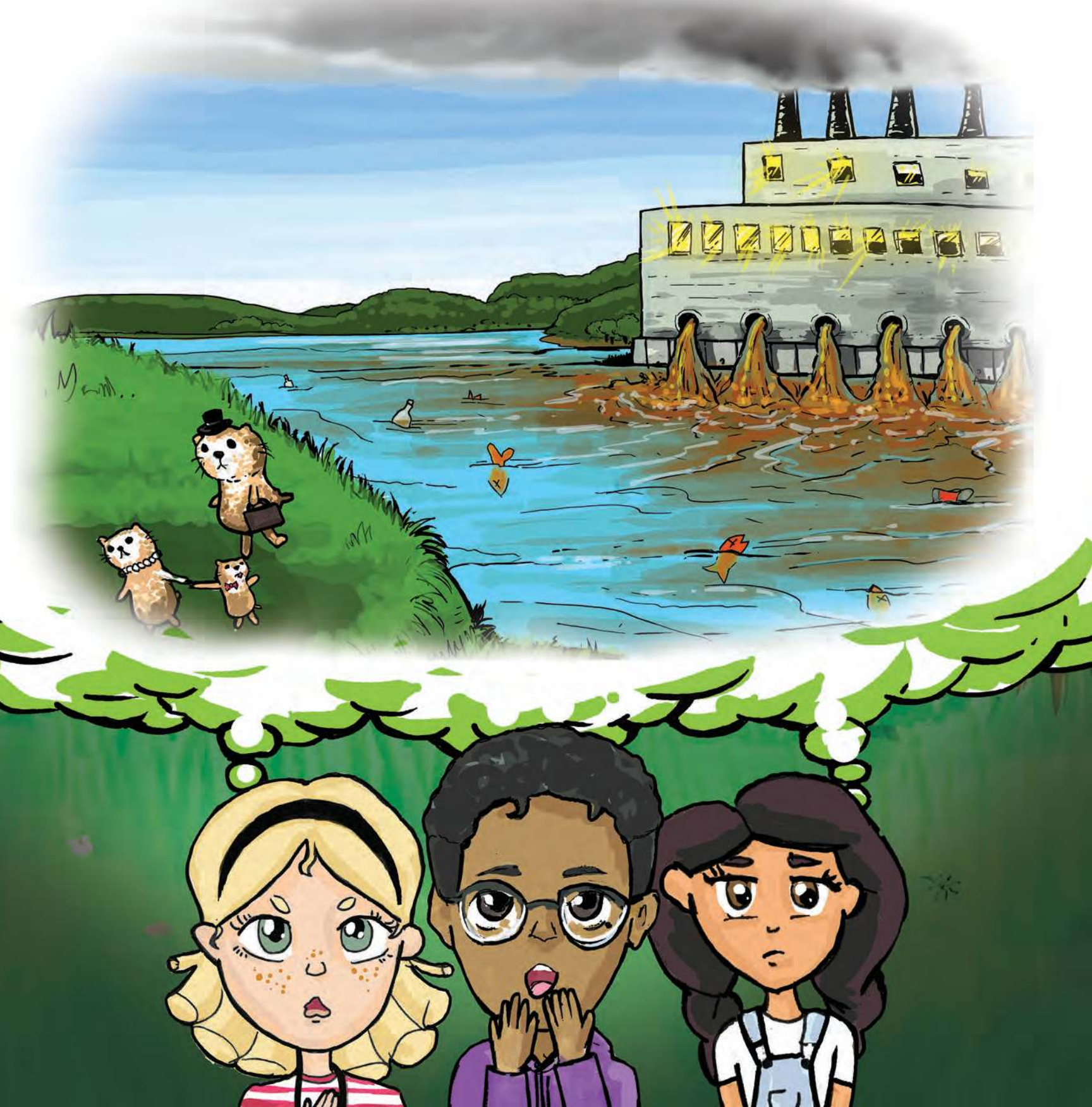
“What do you mean, habitat?” asked Mia.

“Without the right habitat, or place to live,” Oscar explained, “we can’t support wildlife, including otter families because we need clean water and food to survive...”

“Like crayfish and mussels!” barked one of the pups.  
“And amphibians and insects, yum!” added the tinier pup.

“What happened to hurt your habitat?” Mia asked, genuinely concerned.

“We would never mean to hurt you on purpose!” exclaimed Maeve, tears welling up in her eyes.



Oscar recounted, “It all began with the Path of Progress. The mills and the mines gave people jobs and ways to heat their homes and make trains, however, the didn’t realize that their work damaged the rivers and our habitat. Our ancestors had to pack up and leave.”



Miles completely removed his headphones for the first time, processing and deeply listening to the plight of the river otters.

Relaxing more as he recognized the empathy on the faces of the three explorers, Oscar became more empowered and continued to tell his story.

“In a healthy ecosystem,” he explained, “humans and wildlife can coexist. We can live together in a stable web of life.”

Oscar then looked squarely into the eyes of each explorer. “We cannot forget that human activities affect the physical environment and natural resources, even if not seemingly noticeable.”

“Thank you for sharing your story with us,” said Miles.

“It was a very brave thing to do,” commented Mia.

“Look, more otters in the river!” shouted Maeve.



“We came back to visit because we heard that dedicated humans spent the last several decades making change. Their work improved the rivers,” Oscar explained, “Humans grow old though, and I’m afraid we may not get to stay if their work ends.”

“What can we do to help?” Miles asked, startled by the call to action. “I’m just a kid.” Oscar paused and thought about a very big decision he was about to make. In those moments, all that could be heard was the gentle sound of the river flowing. The sound of the river flowing behind the otter’s den reminded Miles of the music from his headphones that he so often relied on to comfort him.

“I’ll take you to my friend, she knows the way,” Oscar decided.

Oscar led the explorers to a log along the edge of the riverbank. They worked together with the otters to push the log into the water. Hopping on quickly, they rode along to the mouth of the river.

Suddenly a voice as soft as a cool summer’s breeze called out to the children.

“Oscar, who have you brought to see me?” the voice cooed as her long waves gently lifted and cradled the cascading log.



The River explained: “My explorers, every river starts as a stream, and little streams connect and become a river. It’s true what Oscar shared. The quality of my water is affected by environmental changes and human actions. This can lead to either good or harm, caused by both action and inaction. Many of our aquatic friends are in jeopardy: the Hellbender Salamander, the Brook Trout, the otter. But you can help.”

“What can we do? We’re just kids?” asked Mia.

“By *listening*,” The River replied.

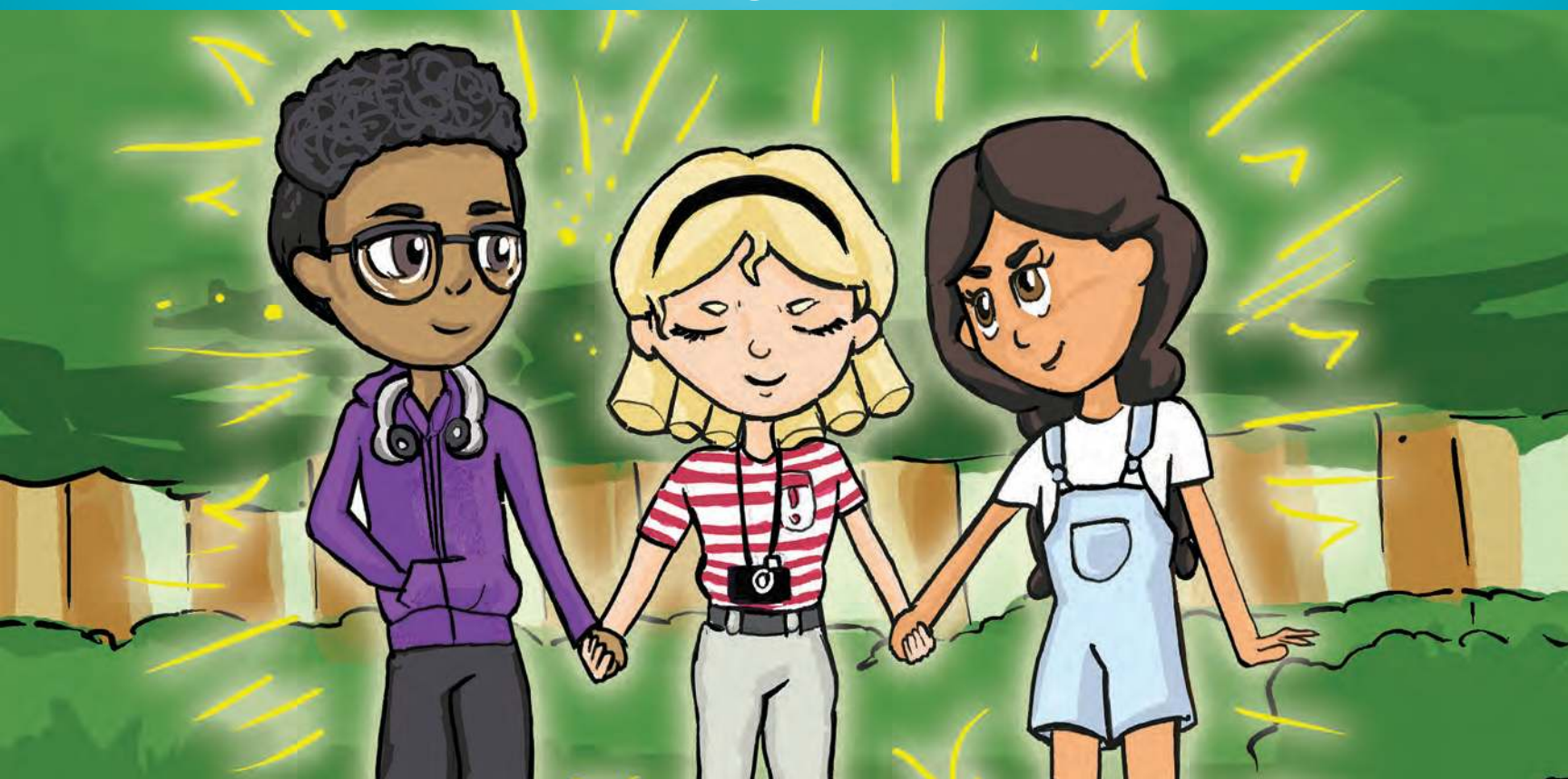
“But what can we do?” Mia questioned again.

“We’re doing it. Nature speaks to us, and we’re listening,” Miles said confidently as he adjusted his glasses and stood tall for the first time. “We’re learning what our friends need, and we’re asking how we can help. And when we don’t know or don’t get an answer, we go find it.”

“So, what do we do now?” asked Mia.

Miles pulled the compass from his pocket. Mia unfurled the map. Maeve stepped forward and grasped her fellow explorer’s hands, forming an alliance.

And with a **RuMble, FLASH! Zzzpp**. They were off again.



The group arrived at the corner of Main and Market Street in downtown Johnstown. Miles pulled the map close to his eyes, “Yep, just as we thought. Look!”



“The map now shows the forest and river!” affirmed Mia.

“And now we are downtown,” added Maeve, looking around...



“There’s City Hall, where all the big decisions are made!” said Mia.

“Wow! There’s an old record shop!” Miles observed.

“Look over there! It’s a dog statue!” Maeve yelled with excitement.



Maeve raised her camera, but was astonished when a real dog came trotting toward her from where the statue had just been!

“Hi! I’m Morley, follow me!” barked the dog. Morley led them to the corner of City Hall, where a high water marker showed how high the flood waters had reached in downtown.



“This High Water marker shows where the water reached during the Johnstown Flood of 1889,” Morley explained.

“There are other water markers too!” Miles pointed up to multiple plaques that rose higher and higher on the building’s side.

“This area has had many great floods over the years...1977...1936...” Morley trailed off.

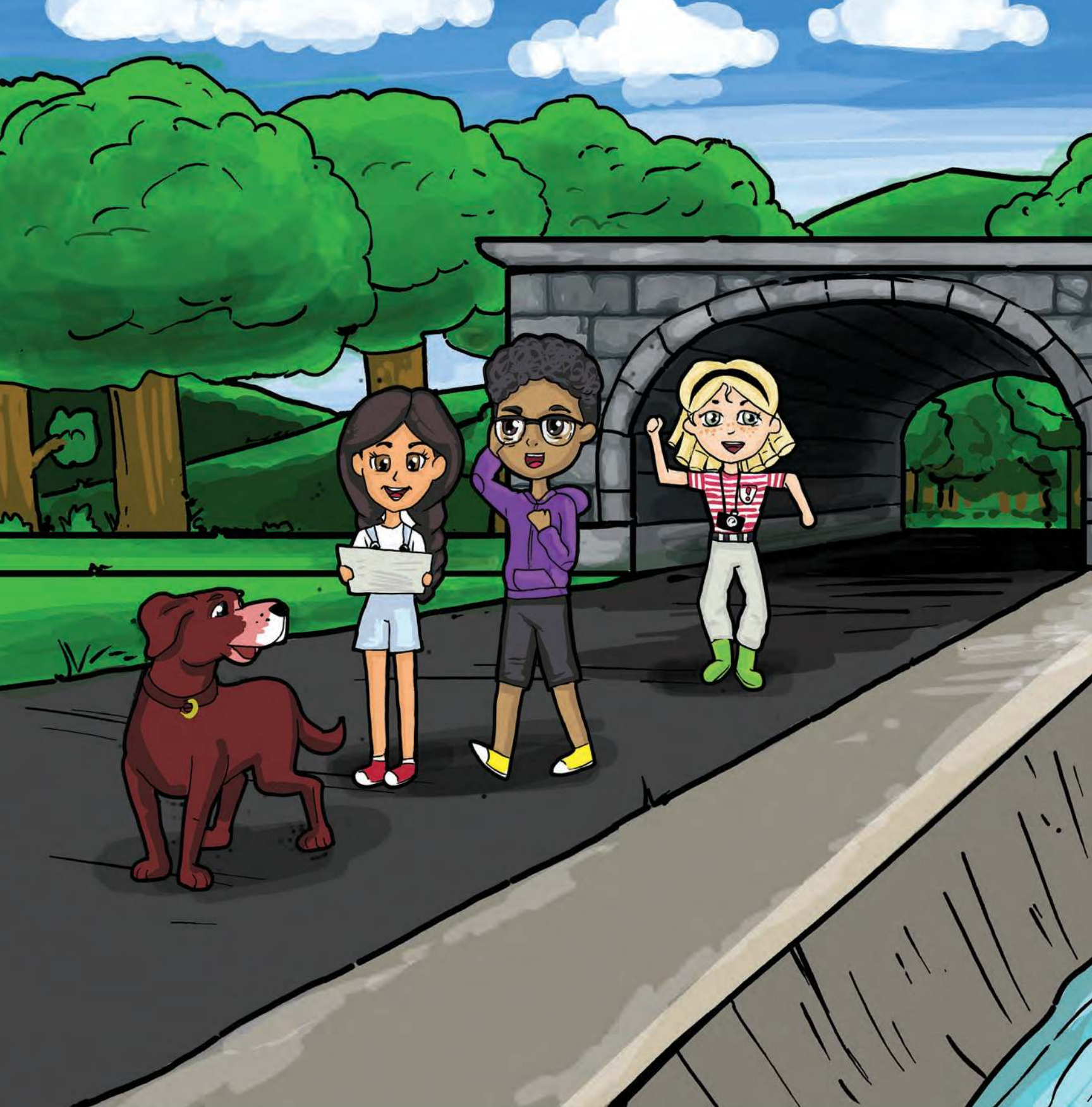
“Anna Ritter told us she saved her friend in the 1889 flood,” Maeve offered.

Morley replied, “Ah, yes, the Great Flood of 1889 was caused by a huge storm and a reservoir upstream bursting its dam.”

“Can we go see the dam?” asked Maeve.

“Of course! Let’s go!” barked Morley.

The three students followed the dog down the streets of Johnstown until they reached the Little Conemaugh River.



“Hello River!” Maeve said, addressing their friend. Maeve then snapped a picture of the train tracks and the River.

“Did the valley look like this back in 1889?” asked Mia.

Morley answered, “The Forest had been cut down around the river. Mines and mills lined the river. Workers pushed soil into the river to make more land for buildings. Waste was pushed into the water. They weren’t aware of how they were affecting the river or the current or future people who rely on the water.”

“They failed to take care of the environment,” Maeve concluded.

The explorers, with Morley leading them, arrived at the breach of the dam.

“Wow, it’s huge!” Miles said in awe.

“Seventy-two feet high and nine hundred and thirty-one feet across the top,” barked Morley.

“How do you know so much about the flood?” a surprised Mia asked.

“I’ve been here since before the Great Flood of 1889. I was a zinc lawn ornament for a wealthy family downtown. I was caught in the floodwaters on that dreadful day. Humans did not take care of the dam and so when there were heavy rains, it broke.”  
Morley replied.



“Could it happen again?” asked Maeve, shuddering at the thought.

“Yes, in fact, since 1889, flash floods have been happening more often due to climate change. The climate is changing because of pollution from industry that harms Earth.” Morley said.

“The changes you have seen in the river today are from local environmental groups and volunteers who keep the water clean to use.” Morley continued.



“That’s what Oscar and the River were telling us! We have to continue to keep the water clean so that the otters and other wildlife can live!” Maeve exclaimed.

“Look, there’s something wrong with the Little Conemaugh!” Morley said, pointing to the river. The explorers ran upstream, noticing an orange creek leading into the main river. Maeve snapped a few photos with her camera.

“Why is the creek leading to the river orange?” Mia asked.

“A mine upstream is the likely culprit. But where?” Morley pondered.



Maeve remembered something. “Wait, I have a lot of pictures in my camera where I took photos of the river. I think I remember seeing where the orange water is coming in. Yes, here it is! I have a printing dock with me that attaches to my camera. Let’s go show the mayor and the rest of City Hall!”

The explorers raced hurriedly on foot back to the City Hall building.



The explorers filed into City Hall in the middle of a meeting. They waited their turn to speak, noticing that Curator Mike was there. Maeve boldly declared, “We are here to explain our findings! We found a source of pollution in the river coming from the old mine! Once the river is clean, we will preserve our biodiversity, meaning we will keep all flora and fauna safe!”

“And the water won’t be orange! The pollution won’t have bad effects on the humans, animals or plants!”

Mia added.

The City Council and county residents murmured and talked amongst themselves.

“What do you suggest needs to be done?” one of the council members asked.

“We need a clean-up crew and we need to stop whatever is polluting the river,” explained Maeve.

“Do you have any proof of this?” asked another council member.

“Yes, this needs to be verified before we spend any money or time on this” yet another council member piped in.

“Go on explorers, show them your evidence,” Curator Mike suggested.

Maeve produced the photographs showing the source of the pollution issue in the river.





The mayor, convinced, chimed in “You’re right, thank you for bringing this to our attention. We will make sure the water is safe. Let’s send a crew in to clean up the source immediately, and contact the state for a plan on how to contain the pollution.”

“Once the river is clean, the otters will be able to move back here permanently, as long as we continue this good work,” Maeve said.

“And stopping the pollution will help prevent climate change!” Mia exclaimed.

“Everyone has to do their part,” added Miles.



Suddenly, the map swooped into the air, unfurling itself in a flurry of sparkling light and movement. All of the places the explorers had been popped up out of the map like holograms. Everyone in City Hall looked shocked, but the explorers knew what was coming next. The ground rumbled, light flashed, and the explorers held hands as they zipped away.



This time the explorers arrived at their next destination, not stumbling, not falling, but easily landing back where their journey began, the Johnstown Area Heritage Association Discovery Center. They found themselves standing at the back of the line of 4th graders who were still slowly moving along behind the teacher as she led the class along the artifact exhibits. Hand-in-hand, the three explorers joined the group as the teacher turned her attention to the map display, the display that started it all.

The teacher peered at the map, confused. “That’s strange,” she said. “This is supposed to be a map of our region, but it’s blank. Perhaps it has faded over time.”



Curator Mike appeared and offered the map to the explorers. Mia, Miles and Maeve exchanged glances, smiled and nodded, silently acknowledging this opportunity.

Mia, secure about her sense of belonging, stepped forward toward the map. “This map appears blank to those who have yet to show curiosity about our past, where we’ve been. Being here at our local museum is a start!” she explained.

Miles, confident about his ability to see and contribute, followed Mia's path to the front of the line. "And if you take the responsibility to not just hear, but really listen, we can start to see things differently," Miles said as he pushed his glasses to the top of his nose and squinted out at the small crowd of wide-eyed children.

Maeve, so proud of what her friends had said, took her place aside her new friends, grabbing hold of her friends' hands. She added, "And if you believe in your own ability to take action based on your new understanding, you will see change."

"Look," shouted a small boy who stood on tiptoes to get a closer look, "I see something!"

"Let me see, let me see," a chorus of small voices rang out as the children chattered excitedly, moving closer and closer to the map.

"It's the JAHA museum! There in the middle!"

As the children gazed at the map, they began to believe in the power to change how they see things, and in their own innate power to be changemakers and explorers.

Curator Mike began, “A whole new world and different future has just opened up for you- for all of you. When you show-”





“Curiosity,” said Mia.

“Responsibility,” said Miles.

“and **Empowerment!**” Maeve finished.

And with a

**RuMbLe, FLASH! Zzpp...**

And a wink...

Curator Mike was gone.





## Afterword

By: Dr. Aspen B. Mock, Project Director & Story Concept Designer

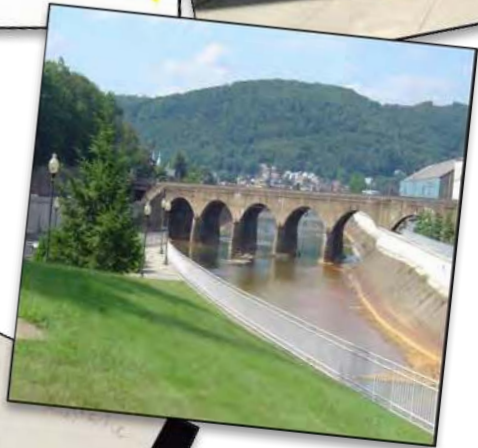
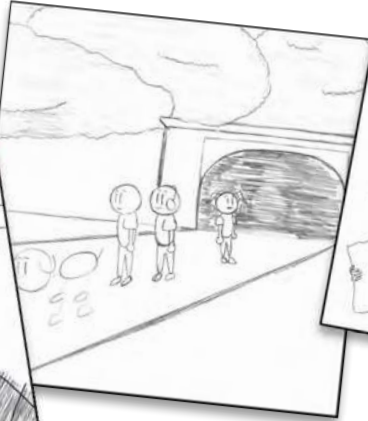
During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Johnstown Area Heritage Association (JAHA) was awarded a grant from National Geographic Education to implement a learning project that could be completed through both distance and in-person learning. JAHA's created this project to empower student imagination with the opportunity to author and illustrate an original children's book based on National Geographic Education's hallmark approach to learning, the Explorer Mindset.

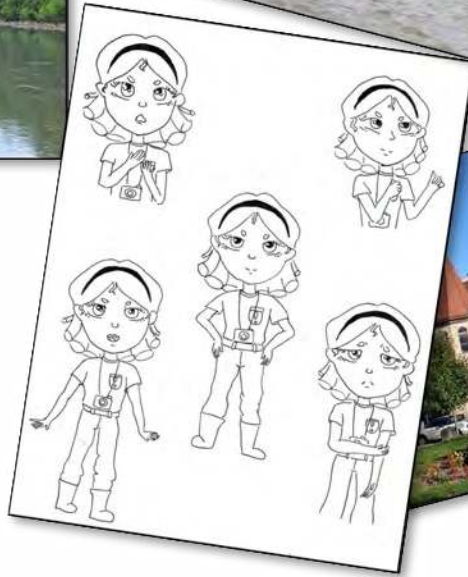
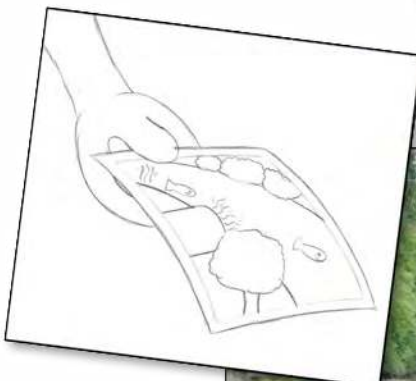
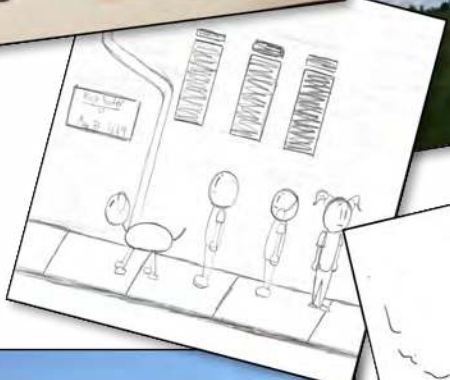
Teachers Tracey King and Melissa Cabo from Greater Johnstown School District (GJSD), Deborah Gdula from Forest Hills School District (FHSD) and Michael Schellhammer from Bishop McCort High School (BMHS) all served as mentor teachers for their students, guiding them on their journeys through authoring each section of the book based on a story frame developed by Aspen Mock & JAHA that featured the ASK framework from National Geographic Education with themes of curiosity, responsibility and empowerment. Koa Beam, the project's artist mentor, led the students and teachers through a series of workshops in which they created their very own character. Each school then developed their character's attributes and featured them in their section of the story. GJSD created the Miles character, FHSD created the Mia character, and BHMS created the Maeve character.

The storyline was inspired by real-life exploration of the Laurel Highlands undertaken by the students and their teacher mentors with support from JAHA. JAHA, as well as community members and organizations created guided field trips and experiences for students to apply the Explorer Mindset. JAHA guided the entire process by crafting and curating a digital archive of their vast repository of resources for the project's content research aspect. JAHA has created a digital exhibit of the students' learning journey, which is available on their website. The book is available for free in both digital and print form.

Elementary teachers Mrs. Melissa Burkardt (GJSD), Mrs. Jennifer Ambrose (FHSD), Mrs. Maria Gibson (FHSD), Mrs. Becky Wehner's Class. Mrs. Staci Faith's Class (FHSD) and Divine Mercy Elementary School all volunteered to read the books as part of their curriculum at their respective school districts. Elementary students were inspired by the Explorer Mindset and the mentorship of the student authors and illustrators by reading copies of the book provided in class sets to each school, and by meeting the high school authors and illustrators to learn about the creative writing and illustrating project.

Congratulations to all teachers and students for creating a transcendent and timely work that encapsulates what it means to be an explorer. Thank you to everyone who has been involved in this project and promoted the empowerment of student voices. We hope that The Laurel Highlands Explorers entertains and inspires everyone to embrace their own unique characteristics, to celebrate their innate curiosity, and to foster a sense of responsibility for preserving the interconnected aspects of our world in our human journeys, for our wildlife and wild places, and in concert with our changing planet. Learn more about our project at: <https://www.jaha.org/>





# The Laurel Highlands Explorers

