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Why these adventurous local teenagers got to meet a British prince

And what Philadelphia's Outward Bound school has to do with the royal family.



His Royal Highness Prince Edward, Earl of Wessex makes a visit to the Racquet Club of Philadelphia meeting players Oscar Wahl, Helayna Hoffman, Sheliya Davis and (R) Ushriya Davis Wednesday afternoon September 12, 2018. DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer

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His Royal Highness Prince Edward, Earl of Wessex, is apparently a "really cool dude."

That's according to Maya Bridges, a 15-year-old from Roxborough who last week met the British prince and members of his entourage while they were visiting Philadelphia as part of an effort to expand a royal youth awards

program to America. And Bridges, one of a handful of local students involved in the program, was part of the welcoming committee.

"It was a little nerve-racking," said Bridges, who met the prince Thursday night at an awards dinner. "But he's a pretty informal guy."

Edward is the fourth and youngest child of Queen Elizabeth II, meaning he was once third in the line of succession to the throne, behind his two brothers, Princes Charles and Andrew. But Edward got leapfrogged because his brothers had children and his nephew, Prince William, had children, too. Now, he's 10th in line.

And so Edward, 54, has become the face of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, a prestigious program started by his father, Prince Philip, the 97-year-old husband of the queen, in 1956. The awards are given to young people ages 14 to 24 who dedicate six months or more to developing skills and giving back to their communities, and it's since become the United Kingdom's version of becoming an Eagle Scout, though it's open to both boys and girls.



Prince Edward greets club president Jon Auerbach while making a visit to the Racquet Club of Philadelphia. DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer

Over its 60-year history, the international awards have drawn relatively little attention in the United States — about 700 young people nationwide

take part now — but the program is beefing up its presence here with the lofty goal of one day enrolling 1 percent of boys and girls in the age bracket. That's more than 400,000 young adults, according to Buffy Higgins-Beard, the CEO of the program's outpost in the U.S.

So it's partnering with groups like Philadelphia's Outward Bound School, a nonprofit outdoor adventure program that every year serves about 5,000 local kids and teens representing a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. So far, about 15 Outward Bound participants have committed to choosing skills they want to develop in pursuit of the DOE Award.

(Oddly enough, the Outward Bound School and the DOE Award have a bit of a shared history: Outward Bound's founder, Kurt Hahn, also established Gordonstoun, a boarding school in Scotland he created with the idea that students should develop both individually and in their communities. That school was attended by Prince Philip and was depicted in an episode of the Netflix series *The Crown* showing [how much his son Charles hated it there.](#))

The partnership is how kids like Bridges were invited to take part in the DOE Award. A sophomore at Central High School, Bridges has gone on two outdoor excursions with Outward Bound and now hopes to study environmental science in the future. To earn her medal, she'll work at least an hour per week for six months on a handful of goals, including improving public-speaking skills and getting better at one of her favorite activities: rock climbing.

Outward Bound's connection is also how Ushriya Davis, a 17-year-old who also lives in the city's Roxborough section, got involved with the DOE Award and became one of a handful of young people who met the prince on Wednesday at the Racquet Club of Philadelphia for a lesson in court tennis, a rarified sport also known as "real tennis" that he mastered as part of his own Duke of Edinburgh Award process.



Maya Bridges, a Central High sophomore, speaks at an event Thursday night that was attended by Prince Edward of Wessex. Photo - Philadelphia Outward Bound School

Prince Edward's Philadelphia stop was part of a 12-day East Coast tour to play court tennis — which was played by King Henry VIII and can best be described as a mix of tennis, volleyball, and chess — while also courting donations to support young people who want to get involved in the award program.

"He was funny and very humble," Davis said after her court tennis lesson. "Honestly, though, I had no idea who he was until he was talking to us. Then in the moment, I was like, 'Oh my goodness.'"

Nonetheless, a prince wearing all white and playing an odd form of tennis in one of the city's most exclusive sports clubs doesn't exactly scream accessibility. Outward Bound's local interim executive director, Dan Hoffman, said he understands that to some Americans, the idea of British royalty can feel "standoffish." (His handlers also wouldn't make him available for an interview.)

But he said that's not what the award program is about. In fact, some participants weren't even aware there *was* a British connection.

"Once we explain this is a pretty incredible network and looks amazing on your college resumé, it makes sense," Hoffman said. "Even I laugh when I say 'his royal highness.' I can't not giggle."