

Students teach and learn at outdoor school

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

“Transferring knowledge from the classroom to the real world is sometimes difficult for a ‘tweenager’ to process,” says Sisters Middle School (SMS) teacher Becky Aylor.

Enter outdoor school. Last week, facilitator Brad Tisdell, SMS teachers, and high-school-age counselors took the SMS sixth-grade class to Camp Tadmor in Sweet Home for three days of full-immersion education — outside, in the elements. It is an exceptional combination of fun and games, bonding and team-building and hands-on educational experiences.

“Outdoor school answers to the ‘Why do we need to learn this?’ question that so many students — and adults — ask,” Aylor said. “It’s the hands-on learning where we see so many students that struggle academically really excel in this type of environment. For some students, this is the first night away from home, or the first experience in a sleeping bag, or building a campfire. Sadly for some, it may be their last.”

The high school counselors are a key element in the

success of outdoor school. They teach classes ranging from water studies to plant studies and supervise activities and the sleepover aspect of the program.

It’s an intense experience for the counselors, who have long hours, significant responsibilities, and a horde of high-energy kids to keep some semblance of control over. And the counselors love the experience.

“Even though we’re all exhausted, I’m so glad I did it,” said Kendra Kemp, who went by the camp name Chickadee.

Seth Larson (Fusa) taught water studies and shelter building. He was impressed with how attentive the kids were, validating Aylor’s point that many young kids actually learn better in a more physically engaging environment.

“It was very eye-opening to see how the kids got along outside the school,” Larson said. “They listen better. They were very engaged.”

Larson’s kids studied macroinvertebrates in streams, using a microscope. There were lively discussions about habitat — and a lot of fun handling “bugs.”

Then there was the fun and

games: “A thing called ‘romp’ where they chase after you and try to throw you in the lake, which was fun.”

There was also what Kemp called “an epic game of capture the flag,” which was enhanced by one day of heavy rain, which turned the field to mud. And what middle schooler doesn’t love playing in the mud?

It’s no wonder their counselors were worn out.

“The next morning when I got back, I fell asleep standing in the shower,” Larson confessed.

“It rained ALL day on day two of ODS (outdoor school),” Aylor said. “Kids were dripping wet and there was not a single complaint — students were bright-eyed asking if the ‘lake would be open’ so they could try canoeing again to attempt to master the rowing technique with a buddy.”

Aylor was full of praise for the high school counselors.

“The high school counselors put in endless hours training on all the what-ifs and night-time questions,” she said. “The talent oozes from our high school students. I am always in awe of how far these students mature since they were in middle school. Seeing them spread their wings to help out the younger Outlaws is inspiring. It is a rigorous process to be chosen as an ODS counselor, students often begin preparing for this upon returning from ODS in

sixth grade!”

Galen Boles (Big Bear) taught plant studies, which was a real eye-opener for many students who had not traveled much in Oregon. Exploring the flora of the Sweet Home area, they learned “how different areas in Oregon can be, even just two hours away,” Boles said.

Boles felt a strong commitment to give his students “the best experience they could have,” and that meant making allowances for rambunctiousness.

“It was three days in a long lesson in patience,” he said. He knew he should “not get mad at them for goofing around a little bit. I was *constantly* at that age.”

Like the other counselors, he is very glad to have taken on the exacting chore.

“My experience was fantastic,” he said.

Aylor noted the contribution of Tisdell (Alpenglow) who has been contracted for many years to facilitate outdoor school.

“Brad Tisdell is freakishly amazing at what he does,” she said. “He can herd cats like none other and brings out the best in everyone in all that he does. The purpose and intentionality he brings as a facilitator is something I am truly grateful for.”

Aylor is passionate about the value outdoor school



PHOTO BY BRAD TISDELL

“Chaco” demonstrates fire starting with wet materials during outdoor school.

brings to students, counselors, teachers — everyone it touches. Experiences there provide lifelong lessons and lifelong memories. She expressed great appreciation for the long-term dedication of Carol Packard, who has been the spark plug of the program at SMS.

“Both of my kids were able to experience outdoor school through SMS, and I cringe at the thought of a shrinking budget where this outstanding program is in jeopardy,” Aylor said. “Carol Packard is close to finishing up two decades of ODS. It is a well-oiled machine that is practically glitch-free. I appreciate her dozens of hours of volunteering to take on this project, as it is not a contracted nor funded position. As a teacher myself, I know that time is so precious and valuable, and to squeeze in one more thing is nothing short of a miracle.”



PHOTO BY BECKY AYLOR

Sixth graders explored the flora and fauna of Camp Tadmor in Sweet Home during outdoor school.

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