

# Chestnut Hill Local

## SCH 9th Grade Students Spend Week on Philadelphia Outward Bound Expedition on Appalachian Trail



During the last week in May, 79 Springside Chestnut Hill Academy 9th grade students went on a backpacking expedition in the Michaux State Forest and the Delaware River Water Gap Recreation Area, hiking sections along the Appalachian Trail.

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by Erin Mooney

A soaking thunderstorm? Check. Soggy backpacking gear? Yes. Hiking six-to-ten miles a day? Check. Exhaustion? Yes. Exhilaration, laughter, unforgettable bonding? Indeed.

During the last week in May, 79 Springside Chestnut Hill Academy (SCH) 9th grade students spent the school week on a backpacking expedition in the Michaux State Forest and in the

Delaware River Water Gap Recreation Area. The students all hiked sections along the Appalachian Trail.

The annual 9th grade trip that has kicked off the SCH high school experience for the past few years was postponed this year due to the pandemic.

The trip was arranged through the Philadelphia Outward Bound School (POBS). “These expeditions have been an important part of the culture at SCH,” said Katie Nelson, the director of safety at POBS. “To give 9th graders a chance to start their year with a shared experience with their peers allows them to take on an outdoors challenge together and gives them the chance to connect in a deeper way,” said Nelson. “That shared experience stays with them throughout high school.”

“They crushed it last week,” Nelson said. “The students really showed up for this trip – they were excited and were willing to give it their best shot.”

The expedition teaches students the basics of backpacking, hiking, map reading, wilderness safety and cooking in the outdoors. The expedition, the first POBS had operated in over a year, felt different for both students and instructors.

“This year’s expedition provided an opportunity for students to be out and away from screens. This trip is arguably more important than ever. To promote human connection and peer-to-peer connection and to allow students to have time to reflect on this past year is so important,” Nelson said.

At the onset of their experience, the students each wrote a letter to themselves which they will receive in the mail in six months. The hope is that they will be reminded to reflect on the experience, and get a better understanding of how it changed them.

Karina Chan is 15 and lives in Chestnut Hill. She said she had no idea what to expect from the experience and was at first nervous about being in a group of students who she didn’t know. Reflecting on the trip less than a week after returning, she said she was sad that it was over.

“It was so fun. A great experience. I wish I could do it again, and I honestly wish it were longer. It really taught me how to make new friends,” Chan said.

Her lasting memory of the trip would not be of the rain, or carrying a pack full of gear, but it was the connections she made on the trip, Chan said. “The thunderstorm was just an obstacle in my path. The real memories will come from connecting with others in my group.”

POBS has a longstanding relationship with SCH. “Our work with Outward Bound stretches back many years,” says Matt Norcini, head of the Upper School at SCH. “And the experiences and testimonies of hundreds of families have affirmed for us that this is a valuable experience and

opportunity that is consistent with our mission and facilitates the transition of our 9th grade students to life in the Upper School,” Norcini said.

“It has been amazing to watch the culture shift at the school around these expeditions, and to see the commitment from SCH teachers and administrators to give students the opportunity and to arrange academic and sports schedules around the trip,” Nelson said.

This year’s expedition included building in COVID-safe practices, including physical distancing practices, as well as COVID testing for all students and instructors before the expedition. POBS follows all CDC, state, local and Outward Bound USA safety protocols.

Kamaha’o Bode, 15, of Blue Bell, is a 9th grade student who went on the expedition. The trip changed her in an unexpected way, she said. “I started to have more appreciation for the things I have at home,” she reflected. “I realized all of the things we have, like transportation and food. I have a new appreciation for what I have at home.”

Bode has important advice for anyone who goes on a Philadelphia Outward Bound expedition. “Go into the experience with an open mind. Don’t listen to anyone’s advice. They haven’t been on the trip. Don’t have a negative mindset, and appreciate what you have.”

This summer, ten rising seniors from SCH will participate in a POBS leadership training course in July. “The summer leadership course provides an opportunity for interested seniors to return to the trail, this time as mentors to 9th grade groups,” Norcini explained. “The hope is to provide our seniors with authentic leadership experiences and our 9th graders with the support and guidance they need to start their Upper School experience.”

POBS is leading over 50 expeditions this summer and fall. Incoming SCH 9th graders will be on fall expeditions, following in the footsteps of other SCH students who have gone before them.

In addition to SCH, every year POBS serves thousands of Philadelphia students through long-standing partnerships with dozens of public and charter schools and youth-serving nonprofit organizations, on expeditions like this one and on “Insight” day programs. Notably, the School District of Philadelphia has also recognized the critical juncture of 9th grade, and engaged POBS to work with their 9th Grade Academy High Schools to create positive school climates and help students achieve their goals.

Among POBS's co-founders are two northwest Philadelphia residents, Chestnut Hill Academy (now SCH) graduate T.S. “Tim” Greenwood of Wyndmoor, who was a trustee of Outward Bound’s Hurricane Island School in Maine and Nancy Goldenberg from West Mt. Airy, who started the organization along with the future Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter in 1992. Both Greenwood and Goldenberg remain actively involved in POBS nearly 30 years later.