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Philadelphia Outward Bound Celebrates 30 Years



Philadelphia Outward Bound School Alumni Taj Murdock, Danielle Merritt and Monshell Reyes with POBS founders the Hon. Michael Nutter, Nancy Goldenberg and Tim Greenwood during the 30th anniversary gala.

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When Danielle Merritt went on a school trip at Beeber Middle School in the early 1990s, she never thought how that trip would change her life.

Merritt, who is currently the assistant principal at the Samuel W. Pennypacker School, was among a group of 40 Philadelphia public school students and eight teachers who traveled to the Chesapeake Bay Outward Bound School in Baltimore in 1993 to participate in a five-day canoeing course.

The trip would become the first expedition in the Philadelphia Outward Bound School (POBS). Merritt has since gone on additional trips when she was a teacher at Overbrook Educational Center.

“Outward Bound changed my life,” Merritt said. “That program really opened up my eyes to see the different possibilities that are out there. It gave me perspective on life in terms of learning leadership and teamwork skills.

“Being in that program really made me stop and think and take into account the things that you say, the things that you do and how great things can happen if you work as a team,” she added.

Established in 1992 by co-founders Nancy Goldenberg, Tim Greenwood and Michael Nutter, POBS is an education nonprofit who has introduced over 70,000 students to nature and team building skills for 30 years.

POBS serves both kids and adults each year through partnerships with schools and non-profit organizations. The program is one of 10 independent, autonomous organizations chartered by Outward Bound USA that is authorized to provide programs in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Northern Delaware, according to the program’s website.

“The vision of our founders was to provide an opportunity for young people in the city to connect to nature,” said Meg Wise, executive director of Philadelphia Outward Bound.

“Through the program, young people are able to master and connect with natural resources in the city,” she added. “They also learn leadership skills, conflict resolution, how to get along with others and the importance of teamwork and communication.”

POBS, which is a part of the Discovery Center in Fairmount Park, provides students with outdoor classrooms through various activities, trips and expeditions.

The wilderness adventure has students canoeing down the Delaware River, hiking the Appalachian Trail, backpacking and rock climbing. The program also provides urban expeditions, where students stay in Philadelphia and explore nature within the city.

“Our main course areas are the Delaware Water Gap so in northeastern Pennsylvania around the New Jersey border,” Wise said. “Canoeing down the Delaware offers an opportunity to do a lot of watershed education for students. They also hike the Appalachian Trail in central South Pennsylvania.

“We have a lot of rock climbing on those courses,” she said. “Some of our courses actually do both so you would do like a week of hiking the trail on the Appalachian Trail and then a week canoeing.

“With the urban expeditions, students have explored Fairmount Park and slept at the zoo,” she added. “These expeditions are a great way for kids to get a new perspective in the city in which they live.”

Merritt said that while she’s been on numerous expeditions with POBS as a student and as a teacher, her favorite was the urban expeditions.

“I was born and raised in West Philly and I still live in West Philly,” Merritt said. “As a teacher, the most significant expeditions to myself and my students were their urban expeditions because you get to see our city in a different way.

“Seeing them navigate SEPTA without using their phones but instead using a map of the city,” she said. “Watching them explore different parks and get a behind the scenes look at how places operate at night by sleeping at the Philadelphia Zoo or in a sailboat in Penn’s Landing has been invigorating.

“The expeditions gave me the opportunity to learn by looking through the eyes of my students by seeing their excitement and thirst for knowledge,” she added.

Today, POBS continues to have a partnership with the School District of Philadelphia. During the 2017-2018 school year, POBS started a program that is offered to 9th Grade Academy students.

The district’s 9th Grade Academy model allows neighborhood high schools to offer targeted academic and emotional support for ninth grade students. Last summer, POBS started another program with Learning Network 11 in the district.

“The district supports our partnership with its schools through the ninth grade academy high schools and through their overall partnership with Outward Bound,” Wise said.

“We’re about 24 schools for the 9th Grade Academies,” she said. “All of the ninth-graders do a day program at the Discovery Center or our other site on Wigard Avenue in the fall. Some of the students go out on five day expeditions in the spring.

“The partnership with Learning Network 11 is geared toward K-8 and middle schools in the geographic subsection of the district in North Philadelphia,” she added. “For that, we have day programming for seventh graders and expeditions for eighth graders. We intentionally mix students from different schools so they have a chance to engage with one another as they move into the ninth grade.