

Fun and life lessons

By Tom Waring
May 17, 2023



Students, chaperones and instructors with their canoes.



Students, chaperones and instructors gathered in a circle to discuss their experience.



Courtesy Andrew Adams



Courtesy Andrew Adams



Courtesy Andrew Adams



Courtesy Andrew Adams



Courtesy Philadelphia Outward Bound School

Ten Northeast High School students just spent five days canoeing at the Delaware Water Gap – with no cell phones or traditional ways to cook, sleep and go to the bathroom – and they loved it.

Even during a few days when bugs, hornets and a canoe tip replaced TikTok and Instagram.

“We had a blast enjoying each other’s company,” said junior Sandy Mezadieu. “We made new friends and connected on a better level at the bonfire the last night. It brought us closer.”

Sandy was the one who tipped over in a canoe with chaperone Andy Adams.

“It was pretty fun to tip over,” she said.

The expedition was courtesy of the Philadelphia Outward Bound School, which provides outdoor classroom activities for students.

Chris Richter, Philadelphia Outward Bound School’s director of marketing communications, explained that the school has been in existence since 1992 and has a contract with the School District of Philadelphia to provide free outdoor activities. There are 10 such schools in the United States and 36 in the world. Donors, grants and foundations fund their work, which includes a free weeklong program for veterans.

The local Philadelphia Outward Bound School and Audubon Pennsylvania are at the Discovery Center at 3401 Reservoir Drive. Some 100-plus miles away is the Delaware Water Gap, on the Pennsylvania/New Jersey border.

“This is all about immersing yourself in nature,” Richter said.

The expedition took place from May 8-12 and is meant to teach leadership, teamwork, self-reliance, organization, responsibility and other skills while they are canoeing on the water and living on small islands.

The expedition consisted of Outward Bound instructors Maura Dajevskis and Ben Goodman, Northeast High chaperones Andy Adams and Katherine Bruns and Northeast High seniors Ethan Winter, Lanasia Rosado, Raquelle Dandy, Aniyah Hawkins and Weixiang Tian and juniors Sandy Mezadieu, Bora Thach, Rick Martins, Christopher Medina and Soamilys Vargas-Gonzalez. Two people were in each canoe.

The group deemed itself the "Adams Family." Andy Adams is a Northeast High history teacher who also runs Project SPARC and Natural Resource Management and is a Philadelphia Outward Bound School board member.

At the start, the students were taught to paddle and steer the canoes. In all, they paddled 38 miles in four days and forged new friendships. Adams, who didn't get into a canoe until age 30, said the students learned well. They were going in circles at the start, then soon were skilled enough to race each other.

Students carried heavy gear, dug holes to go to the bathroom and learned to pitch tents, cook and navigate the river. They spent an hour of reflection and wrote a letter that will be mailed to them in six months.

Adams said he was happy to spend Teacher Appreciation Week with the students and described the experience as "absolutely amazing."

"Outward Bound is a godsend," he said. "The wilderness was our house. You become family after this. It brings them together. You have to operate as a team or it doesn't work."

The trip featured nice weather and great scenery.

Dajevskis, the Outward Bound instructor, said she was happy to see the students both act independently and work as a unit, making decisions by consensus.

"This was one of my best expeditions to date," she said.

After arriving back, the students were treated to pizza, given their phones, received patches as Outward Bound alumni and gathered in a circle to share their experience.

"I was really nervous, but I was really excited to get out in nature," said Soamilys Vargas-Gonzalez. "It went great. We had a really good time."

"We got to know each other and it brought us together," said Raquelle Dandy.

And while they got a little homesick, they didn't really miss their cell phones.

"We didn't need our phones," Raquelle said. ●●