

Making the wilderness their house



By **Tom Waring** June 17, 2024

Seventeen Northeast High School students recently completed their freshmen year with a unique experience outside the classroom – hiking and canoeing at the Delaware Water Gap.

Nine students hiked for five days, from June 3-7, while eight navigated canoes for the week.

The teenagers had no cell phones or traditional ways to cook, sleep and go to the bathroom, but returned with smiles on their faces.

“I learned to appreciate the stuff I have,” said Xavian Bell, one of the hikers.

Philadelphia Outward Bound School, located at the Discovery Center at 3401 Reservoir Drive in Fairmount Park, sponsored the expedition.

The school, in existence since 1992, has a contract with the School District of Philadelphia to provide free outdoor classroom activities for students.

Each group was accompanied by a chaperone from Northeast and three instructors from Outward Bound School. They drove to the Delaware Water Gap, which is more than 100 miles away and sits near the Pennsylvania/New Jersey border.



Credit: Jessica Duong

Areeb Chowdhury, one of the hikers, described the experience, including a chance to do some rock climbing, as “awesome.” He and his classmates were able to meet other people hiking the trail.

In all, Areeb and the others hiked 16 miles, and picked up some cuts and bruises while rock climbing. He said the expedition could be physically demanding at times, but worth the effort.

"It was fun," he said. "The view was amazing. The instructors were nice and helped us with everything."

Both groups battled bugs, carried heavy gear and learned to pitch tents, read maps and cook as they made the wilderness their house for the week. They saw some wildlife along the way.

The expedition is meant to teach leadership, teamwork, self-reliance, organization and responsibility.



Credit: Jessica Duong

Catalina Vasquez, one of the canoers, said the food – oatmeal, cereal, spaghetti, mac and cheese, pizza bagels and burritos – was pretty good. Vasquez added that it was fun to learn to pitch a tent, especially in a way to keep out rain. The days were planned out well, she said, and left room for the teens to swim and play games.

"It was a good experience," she said. "We had good instructors, we got to know each other and it got pretty fun."

The canoes fit two to a boat, and the students learned to paddle and steer.

Asher Coles said everyone got a laugh when classmates Eli Gardiner and Christian Moore tipped over in their canoes, but that the whole week was fun.

"I like the water a lot, and this was something new I could experience," he said. "And we had someone to talk to in the boat."

Jessica Duong, a physical science teacher at Northeast, was the chaperone for the hikers. She said the trip allowed for team building, leadership and independent reflection.

"This teaches them about resilience and being able to push themselves farther," she said.

One day, the hikers walked 6.5 miles, stopping to rest to give them more energy. The trails were, at times, rocky, uphill, downhill and slippery, and some students used walking sticks to keep from falling.

"After a few days, we adapted," said Luzmaria Apanco. "The instructors helped out."

Luzmaria and the other hikers and canoers bonded and made friends, and some of them decided to spend a couple of nights outside of the tent, sleeping under the stars.



Andrew Dunakin, a counselor at Northeast, was chaperone for the canoers. In all, they paddled 23 miles.

Dunakin said the students each had a chance to lead the group during the expedition. As a counselor, he hears from students who come to him with a variety of challenges.

For the eighth students he chaperoned, he believes, the canoeing experience – and all that goes into making the weeklong trip a success – will help them overcome obstacles they'll face.

"They get introduced into it, and with time and support from others, they can do that," he said. "It's a great lesson. And, they're getting it done in a week."

When the students returned, they were given their cell phones, treated to pizza and took part in a graduation ceremony that included them gathering in a big circle to discuss the challenges and the way they pushed themselves, all while laughing, having fun and learning something new.



Kim Glodek, director of education and partnerships at Outward Bound School, said the expeditions offered by POBS align with the goals of the school district and individual schools.

Each year, Glodek said, many students come back from the trip saying they'd gladly go again. For others, she said, a week in the outdoors might not be for them.

In Glodek's view, the trips accelerate the students' social and emotional growth. She likes to see the way the teens "blossom" after returning from the week away, as they each realize they are needed around camp to make the trip go as planned.

"They're really focused on themselves and the team," she said. "They experience things they never have before. They're being challenged outside the classroom. They're learning about themselves. They step up to the challenge and surprise themselves." ●●