

Camping trip teaches Wilson Magnet students about themselves

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What happens when you take a bunch of city kids into the rugged Canadian wilderness without iPods, cell phones or computers, without showers or fast food, challenge them with rock walls and rope courses and show them how to identify bear scat and track moose?

They report a life-changing experience and come home feeling pretty good about themselves and their friendships. Over the four-day Memorial Day weekend, 30 Wilson Magnet High School students, freshmen through seniors, young men and young women, traveled 400 miles to Camp Pathfinder, a 17-acre island in Algonquin Park, Ontario.

The students all are members of the Wilson Outdoor Club, formed just last September with three charter members, for the purpose of exposing them to a variety of outdoor activities — from orienteering to skiing to nature walks.

"I didn't realize how much this trip meant to me until I tried to readjust to city life on Tuesday," says senior Dalton LaBarge, 17. "There were people everywhere, and buses and garbage. I kept remembering all the teamwork and composure we exhibited."

In real time, the trip was about nature skills. "It was an opportunity for them to learn about science, environmental science and the impact of modern life on nature," says Davin Reddington, a history teacher and one of the club's advisers.

"It was a chance for them to live in an environment they've never experienced before and to adapt," says Libby Tobin, also a history teacher and club adviser. And adapt they did — to the physical challenges, such as the ropes course, but also to the frigid lake water they used to bathe, to the rough terrain and the simplicity and isolation of life so far from home.

"I must admit that I learned a lot about myself. I was able to deal with bugs — which I hate — get to know more about my classmates, go orienteering, see new things and be away from my family for a holiday weekend — all for the first time," says Jalyssa Tucker, 17 and a junior.

"Camp was an introduction to a world outside our own digitally dependent one," says junior Elaje Gonzalez, 17. "We learned how to be entertained by the wilderness."

Camp Pathfinder, founded in 1914, marks its 95th season this year. It has historically offered month-long summer programs in nature skills for 100 boys at a time. Many of those Pathfinder alums report that learning about wildlife, navigating the woods, canoeing and survival changed their lives as well. And those alum, some going back 50 years, annually give to an Algonquin Campership Fund that pays expenses for summer campers in need; the fund paid for the full cost of the Wilson trip, the first time it has ever done such a thing.

The camp's co-owner, Michael Sladden, is a Rochester native who winters in Brighton when the camp is closed. In the spring and fall, he and his partner bring school groups for several days at a time.

"No matter your heritage or bank balance, Pathfinder has always been the great north woods equalizer," Sladden says. "The rusticity, the rigorous activities, the mild deprivations shared in a setting of stunning beauty — these become simply a background against which relationships are forged, and personal character revealed. Almost always, people find they are capable of more than they thought, and are much wiser, kinder and more valuable to others than they ever dreamed."

Junior Hazel Moellering, 16, has always camped with her family. But at a post-trip meeting with the club, she said, "it was interesting to see all of you getting comfortable with getting dirty and not showering."

On that point, senior Matt Ceravolo, 17, says he learned something useful to take with him to the University of Michigan in the fall. "If you have a ton of toothpaste and deodorant, you can go days without showering and nobody will complain."

Senior Carolyn Gombert, 18, says the trip was full of "stuff you just never see, like pouring milk from the rafters into your Social Studies teacher's mouth."

"It was like the longest weekend I ever had," says freshman Ian Scott, 14. "We just did so much." Added sophomore Amanda DiTomasso, "I'm usually very quiet at school, but at camp, I was really outgoing."

And that, says Trip Pierson, a Pathfinder alum and co-founder of the Algonquin Campership Fund, is the point. "Everything slips away when you get up to that island," he told the students. "Every one of you spoke of the relationships you formed. You get it. That's what this is about."

It was an experience of a lifetime, way more than the three students and an adviser imagined last September. And the word has spread, Reddington says. Already more students are asking to join next year.

At the same post-trip meeting, Meghan Reddington, Davin's wife and a fourth-grade teacher in Fairport, told the students: "When Mr. Reddington got off the bus, I saw tears in his eyes. This is why teachers teach, for moments like these. You are an incredible group of kids and he is so proud of you."

You could just see it in every club member's eyes: Camp Pathfinder was the best classroom ever — where they learned not just about the natural world, but about their own inner nature, too. They liked what they saw.