



Nonprofit organizations nourish the people within our communities, caring for those in need, protecting our historic heritage, educating young and old, and nurturing our cultural soul. Each month, *The Laurel* brings you some of the stories behind these agencies. This month, the “spotlight” is on Muddy Sneakers (muddysneakers.org).

BY LEANNA JOYNER

Muddy Sneakers is taking science education for fifth grade students into nature in four western counties of North Carolina. The unification of classroom learning with hands-on experiences helps students learn the lessons of ecosystems, living organisms, weather, and water cycles more comprehensively.

“All children learn slightly differently,” says Edneyville Elementary principal Chad Auten whose fifth graders have been augmenting their schoolroom lessons with Muddy Sneakers for the past several years. “I’ve heard kids say several times after taking a test, quiz or EOG [end-of-grade test] how they remember the answer from Muddy Sneakers. It’s one thing to hear it, but it’s another thing to get in the stream or put your hands in the dirt.”

Chad adds, “We’ve been 95%-plus proficient in the last three years for science testing. I think it’s in large part due

MUDDY SNEAKERS™

the joy of learning outside

to good science instruction in the classroom every day and the partnership with Muddy Sneakers for students to get that hands-on experience.”

Schools like Edneyville commit to at least six—but as many as ten—sessions with Muddy Sneakers environmental education instructors who take students into the school yard, nearby park, or forest to touch, see, smell, and hear the lessons that correlate to the required state science standards. As a result of the focused curriculum, Muddy Sneakers executive director Ryan Olson says schools see a direct improvement in science test scores.

Ryan emphasizes that the kind of interactivity bred in an outdoor learning environment often benefits a larger spectrum of students than conventional classroom learning.

“Children, particularly ones suffering from ADHD, thrive in the outdoors. Every year we have teachers come to us and say ‘that student was the most challenging student before we came out here,’” says Ryan.

Utilizing place-based education creates environmental literacy so students understand how they fit in the natural world, because for many of them this is their first outdoor experience in their surrounding landscape. Through