

STEWARDS IN THE MAKING

BY DAN HESSE

Children's natural habitat is outdoors. They live in an enviable world that is disproportionately scaled at an astronomical level. The tiniest creek is a monolithic waterway; the smallest patch of forested backyard is an infinite wilderness to explore. Children are free to delve into that universe and discover treasures adult eyes have been conditioned to overlook, uninhibited to ponder an abundance of "what-ifs" unencumbered by the shackles of artificial limits.

Brevard-based Muddy Sneakers is an experiential learning-based program that aims to foster that sense of wonder while bolstering it with a scientific curriculum. Co-founder Aleen Steinberg says the idea for the program was born after she finished a book that's been seminal to the outdoors community. "Reading Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* brought awareness of the disconnect many of today's children have with the natural world." Aleen discovered she was not alone in this

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concern, as she found a number of like-minded people in the community, including fellow co-founder Sandy Schenk. Sandy says his experience as founding director of Green River Preserve — a camp with the mission of "connecting children with nature" — has solidified his belief in cultivating outdoor experiences for youth. "[Green River] primarily attracts children from upper socioeconomic brackets and private schools.

Muddy Sneakers was started at Green River Preserve to help local public school children and serve as a model for the state and beyond."

Aleen and Sandy realized the combination of eco-conscious citizens and the abundance of forestland encompassing Brevard was perfect for planting the seeds of what would become Muddy Sneakers. "Brevard," Aleen says, "with the surrounding areas of rich biodiversity, stands to gain from having a population of informed kids who grow up to be adults concerned with conservation." But surprisingly, one of the problems is that the national forest land surrounding Brevard can be as big as the lack of knowledge about those ecological habitats. "I've been astonished to learn there are kids in Brevard...who have never been in the woods!"

Another challenge is that orthodox classroom settings can sometimes stymie bright minds. In a world where children are often told "Don't touch anything" or "Stop asking so many questions," the experiential education model of teaching flips those conventions upside down in the name of immersion. Muddy Sneakers Executive Director Ryan Olson states: "It is our opportunity to not only increase science aptitude but provide the doorway for what we hope will become a lifelong love of (or at least an understanding of) the natural world on a more intimate level." Muddy Sneakers' goal is to give kids experiential education that provides a foundation for understanding their natural settings. Muddy Sneakers fills the gap left by a lack of experiential education in schools.

The beauty and brilliance of this model is that it's about more than giving kids lessons in science and backcountry education; it's about seizing the opportunity to cultivate fertile minds that will influence the future of this community. Aleen says, "One can learn about the natural world from a book, a blackboard, a computer, a teacher, but the act of the children being 'in' the lesson...is priceless and necessary."

Those lessons range from instruction on land- and water-based ecosystems to conservation. Ryan says they are providing a template: "I hope Muddy Sneakers will provide schools with a model for how to begin incorporating experiential methods into the traditional public school model." And if all of this seems to have a bit too much of a feel-good vibe, Muddy Sneakers cites studies that show students who participate in its program score about 20% higher in science, math, and reading on fifth-grade state standardized testing than those who don't. But it goes beyond test scores and standards. The program gives kids the tools to learn in the natural world: to pioneer a creek exploring expedition and point out facts about aquatic habitats and sustainability to their friends while doing what children naturally do. These are transformative experiences that translate into the shaping of lifestyles. As Sandy says, "Muddy Sneakers achieves its mission, so children become better students, teachers become better science instructors, and new environmental leaders are nurtured to continue their education and become better stewards of the land." And Muddy Sneakers is providing about 1,000 kids a year with these opportunities.

Operating as a nonprofit means the program faces challenges beyond making converts of its approach; it also is always looking

for funding and for volunteers. Ryan is optimistic about the future: "I quickly came to recognize why schools were clamoring to be a part of the program, and now, it is our goal to secure adequate funding to offer these same opportunities to students far beyond our western North Carolina roots." That optimism and cumulative effect of what Muddy Sneakers is doing in Brevard, and the greater western North Carolina community, means its supporters and mission go forward with an ever-strengthening resolve with an understanding that it's bigger than all of them. As Aleen says, "God isn't making any more of this stuff, and it's up to us to preserve and protect our natural world."



MUDDY SNEAKERS CO-FOUNDER SANDY SCHENK AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN OLSON