

SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES  
**Muddy Sneakers**  
participants gather on Big  
Rock in early fall in Dupont  
State Forest.



## No child left inside

5th-graders benefit from community support of Muddy Sneakers' outdoors education programs

By Maria Hardee Milling  
Citizen-Times correspondent

**G**iving area fifth-graders a hands-on learning opportunity in the natural world is the goal of the Muddy Sneakers program, based in Brevard. They aim to supplement science curriculum while giving kids much needed exposure to the environment. Community collaboration and continual financial support is a critical component to building a sustainable program.

A couple of companies making an entrance into Asheville (Whole Foods and New Belgium Brewing Company) have already pinpointed Muddy Sneakers as a nonprofit they want to support and embrace the "no child left inside" movement.

When Whole Foods Market opened on Tunnel Road in Asheville in August of this year, it gave customers a chance to tour the facility before it opened with suggested donations to the Muddy Sneakers program. Along with the money received, Whole Foods tossed in their share bringing the total to \$5000. When store officials announced the gift at their grand opening, they also revealed Eden Development, LLC was providing an additional \$1,500.

New Belgium Brewing also recently gave Muddy Sneakers a grant for \$5,000 and opened the door for future gifts as the program evolves and expands.

It's this type of community support that executive director Ryan Olson says is critical to creating new generations of environmental stewards. Schools contribute a third of the programming expense with the other two thirds coming in from private donors and corporations.

"We have a lot of community sponsored support in Transylvania County where we are based," said Olson. "It's a big deal to have Asheville recognize us as one of their own. When we look at the New Belgium grant and the Whole Foods grant, it's a big deal. We're starting to become more entrenched in the Asheville community."

According to its website (MuddySneakers.org), the nonprofit introduced its Community Sponsor program in 2012. Every sponsorship dollar goes directly toward funding stu-

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### ADVENTURE OF THE WEEK: HIKE FONTANA VILLAGE RESORT

**What:** A guided hike to enjoy all colors at historic Fontana Village Resort near Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

**When:** 11 a.m.-2 p.m. every Saturday through Dec. 13.

**Where:** Fontana Village Resort, Fontana Dam. For directions and details, visit <http://www.fontanavillage.com/>

**Cost:** The hike is free; those who wish to stay over may take advantage of lodging specials.

**Details:** Autumn isn't over at Fontana Village Resort. Many fiery maples as well as some golden hickories, red oaks, purple sweetgums and tulip poplars are continuing this year's foliage display. This adventure gives leaf peepers an opportunity to take to the back roads along the quiet side of the Smokies where color still remains.

The four-mile round-trip hike travels along the Lakeshore Trail to see the fall colors, lake vistas and reminders of a bygone era, like an abandoned Model T.

The hike begins at the Fontana terminus of the Lakeshore Trail, which winds through a second growth hardwood forest and joins the old roadbed of NC 288. Cross Payne Branch and view Lake Fontana and Fontana Dam through the trees along the two-mile journey into the park.

Recreation director J.P. Peoples will talk about the abandoned vehicles left by former residents of the North Shore and will answer questions about the history of the area.

For guests wishing to stay over at the resort, stay two nights and receive the third

night free on all lodge rooms and take 20 percent off of all cabin rentals. Outdoor weekend activities for guests include miles of trails for hiking and biking as well as a full-service marina.

Fontana Village Resort is set amid the beauty of the Nantahala Forest of Western North Carolina, gateway to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Accommodations include lodge rooms and cabins that provide complimentary WiFi, as well as restaurants, a general store, gift shop, pools, conference space and more.

For more information, visit the website or call 498-2211 or toll-free 1-800-849-2258 or email [info@fontanavillage.com](mailto:info@fontanavillage.com).

Staff reports



Fall colors along Hazel Creek, which is accessible via the Fontana Village marina.

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**SNEAKERS**

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dent participation. A \$60 donation will sponsor a fifth grader for a full year. The goal is to receive 30% of the programming cost from the communities where they operate their program.

The annual operating budget for Muddy Sneakers is \$270,000, with most of that going to pay trained instructors.

**Growing organically**

Through the Muddy Sneakers program, many fifth grade students in our area are immersed in the natural world six days a year as part of their science curriculum. They spread it out so the kids spend some time in the woods during fall semester and again in the spring.

Schools taking part include Asheville City Schools' five elementary schools plus Francine Delany, as well as schools in Transylvania, Henderson and McDowell Counties. They recently added Saluda School in Polk County. Next fall, they'll be in one to three schools as part of a pilot program in Greenville, S.C.

They are in talks with Buncombe County Schools and expect to offer programming in at least one Buncombe school by next year. Additionally, they hope to soon grow into Haywood, Rutherford and Jackson Counties.

Instructors teach in small groups with a student teacher ratio of 12:1. Parents are encouraged to sign up as chaperones and take part in the learning expeditions.

While Muddy Sneakers is focused on organic growth in this region, they also field requests from schools in California, Oregon, New York, Florida and other states that are interested in replicating the model.

**School in the woods**

"Muddy Sneakers is not a field trip," said Olson. "We are an extension of the classroom. Instead of a ceiling there is sky and instead of chairs there are logs and dirt, but this is still school."

Students are divided into two-person teams that share a



Muddy Sneakers kids take notes on some of their findings.

Muddy Sneakers backpack. It contains a compass, magnifying glass, sitting pads, maps, and other supplies relevant to the topic that will be studied that day.

While some kids may have exposure to the outdoors on family outings, for others it's a new experience to be engaged in a natural setting. Even more exciting for Olson is that role reversals often emerge among the students.

"It's not uncommon to see a follower or a child that's a distraction in the classroom become a leader in the field," said Olson. "And some of the most capable students in the classroom who are very book smart may not be that comfortable outdoors."

Teachers say this pattern interrupt of moving the class

outdoors gives them the opportunity to see their students in a new light. Often they are surprised at the new skills they witness.

One teacher in Asheville City Schools had this to say about the transformation she observed during a Muddy Sneakers program with one of her fifth grade students: "He reads and writes at a kindergarten or first grade level, but today I heard him articulate ideas about the ecosystem that show a level of understanding beyond what I knew he had before."

And in Transylvania County, a teacher said, "As an educator I have seen tremendous changes in students who participate in Muddy Sneakers. Students who typically never shine in the classroom are



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Muddy Sneakers outings offer a wide variety of opportunities for observation.

stepping up and leading groups in conversations outside the classroom."

"We bring a lot of value to science instruction," said Olson. "It's having a lot of impact on EOGs. We are opening kids to possibilities in themselves and in enjoying and understanding the natural world. We're not saying this experience will create more scientists, but hopefully we'll create citizens who are conservation minded."

**Into the wild**

Bent Creek is the main site for Muddy Creek's programming, but they use other sites within a 30-minute drive of each school.

Bent Creek is an experimental forest, but there's increasing use for recreational purposes," said Olson. "We have a really good relationship with the Forest Service. They want to have an educational component and see our program as creating good stewards."

Muddy Sneakers has also developed a partnership with the Southern Appalachian Highland Conservancy (SAHC), which helps them diversify where they take the students. As part of their mission, Muddy Sneakers never takes a class to a piece of property that isn't permanently protected.

A farm recently purchased by SAHC in the western part of Buncombe County gives kids

exposure to sustainable agriculture practices. Olson says it's a great place to tell a conservation story.

Other sites in the region they take students include the DuPont State Recreational Forest, Gorges State Park, Lake James State Park, and NC National Forests.

"It's not uncommon for students to bring their family back out to the sites where they went and had a great time with Muddy Sneakers. We don't go to remote locations. We only go places they can easily get back to," said Olson.

**Other opportunities to experience Muddy Sneakers**

When it comes to programming during the school year, Muddy Sneakers has positioned itself as the experts in fifth grade. But outside of the regular year, they've come up with some creative ways to expand their services to other age groups.

A summer day camp program — Camp Muddy Sneakers — will be in its third year next summer. The camp caters to kids who are rising fourth to rising seventh grade students. The camp experience does not duplicate what is taught during the school year. It's an immersion experience and gives kids a chance to step away from their electronics and spend full days outdoors.

Plans are also in the works to launch Muddy Sneakers first middle school programming this spring. They expect to offer an after school course through the IRL (In Real Life) Program at Asheville Middle School.

"Most of those kids at Asheville Middle will have already had the Muddy Sneakers experience when they were in fifth grade," said Olson. "The after school program is not academic, but an opportunity to explore the outdoors with maybe a little more hiking involved. We'd love to figure out what works and use as a template for after school programming in other school districts."

Muddy Sneakers got its start in 2007 as a pilot program in Transylvania County. It's grown steadily every year. To learn more, visit MuddySneakers.org.

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