

Pathways

notes from the field

MUDDY SNEAKERS SPRING/SUMMER 2016

Small Seeds

From a small seed a mighty trunk may grow.

-Aeschylus

In 2008, Muddy Sneakers was an unproven, startup nonprofit launching in the worst of economic times with two adventurous schools in Transylvania County - Brevard and Pisgah Forest Elementary. These schools took a risk but saw promise in the program and shared a desire to improve science aptitude and connect students to nature. Nine years later, the organization has become a leader in elementary experiential science programming with a portable model expected to serve a minimum of 25 schools in North and South Carolina in 2016-17.

Time sure does fly by when you're having fun in the woods! Although it's hard to believe, this June Muddy Sneakers will watch as the program's inaugural class of 5th grade students graduate from Brevard and Rosman High Schools. Jessa Goldman, a senior at Brevard High School, had this to share about her Muddy Sneakers experience:

"I had a great time doing Muddy Sneakers! Looking back now, I really appreciate how we were given the opportunity to learn science outside

instead of only in the traditional classroom. The things that stick out most in my memory are eating wild berries, learning about erosion, writing a letter to my future self, spotting wild animals, and finding rare fungi. Overall, it was a very positive experience and I am so glad I got to be a part of it."

Since that inaugural class, Muddy Sneakers has continuously served all five public elementary schools in Transylvania County, many of which have achieved dramatic success to date on both a quantitative and qualitative level. In so doing, the organization has worked to set a new standard for non-formal environmental education and has hopefully played a role in raising the collective bar for elementary science instruction. Brevard Middle School 6th grade science teacher, Noelle Khare, has witnessed the before and after impact of Muddy Sneakers:

"Muddy Sneakers has given my 6th grade students practical, hands-on experiences in nature interacting with their local ecosystems. Our middle school science classes are now able to build on these field experiences, with

a more advanced curriculum, in a way they weren't able to do before."

Since the first expedition to DuPont Forest, Transylvania County residents have been there to support Muddy Sneakers every step of the way. When budgets were tight, it was local sponsors and invested parents that stepped forward (and even 4th graders who "threatened to riot" if they couldn't participate). This long history of local support continued in late 2015 with a generous award from the **Transylvania Endowment**, a testament to the community's ongoing investment in the program they helped launch.

Home for Muddy Sneakers will forever be Transylvania County, where the program's roots run deep. On behalf of the organization we would like to collectively congratulate our inaugural class of 5th grade students - **Transylvania County's Class of 2016!** We wish them all a life of continued learning and exploration and for those leaving home, may you return to find solace and wonder in the mountains, streams and natural areas that make Transylvania County so magical.



Cover Photo:
DuPont State
Recreational Forest, the
site of Muddy Sneakers' first
Learning Expeditions.

Inset Photos:
Students and Instructors
from Muddy Sneakers' first year.

Instructor Spotlight: Taylor Maxson



What is your background?

I have degrees in philosophy and writing, and have worked as a wilderness therapist, classroom teacher, Outward Bound instructor, program administrator, and permaculture designer. Raising eco-literacy in children and young adults is my primary mission, and I believe that access to and interaction with wild and urban nature is a birthright for all people.

How long have you been a MS instructor?

I'm in my fourth year as a Muddy Sneakers lead instructor. I get to travel to beautiful natural places all around Western NC to work with other extremely knowledgeable naturalists, facilitate dynamic interactions between children and ecosystems, play and be silly, and be serious—all while opening up 5th graders' minds to the previously unseen natural patterns around them.

Why do you like being a MS instructor?

My favorite moments at Muddy Sneakers are the little things. When the light goes off in a child's mind as they discover that decomposers aren't just a name on a chart. The quiet that ripples in a group when they settle into a solo reflection experience after a frenetic day of hiking and exploration. The feedback from a teacher or parent that they saw a child in a whole new light during an expedition.

What is your favorite expedition site?

We do some serious commuting to get to our expedition sites, and I most enjoy Gorges State Park. Amazing waterfalls and views of the escarpment, and a wildly bio-diverse region with a stunning amount of rainfall.

What do you spend time doing when not teaching for MS?

I grow New Mexico green chiles and kale on our small farm property in Asheville. I am also a songwriter and play and perform my own music around town.

Director's Report



"Gloria is an educator, an environmentalist, a visionary, a woman with dogged determination whose vocabulary doesn't include the word 'can't.' She's a force to be reckoned with, a force whose size five boot leaves a size ten footprint."

-Aleen Steinberg, Muddy Sneakers Co-Founder and Board Member

In the fall of 2011, I made the trip to Brevard from Charleston to observe Muddy Sneakers for the first time. Upon arriving at Brevard Elementary to shadow a schoolyard expedition, I was greeted by a short woman with a big smile sporting KEEN hiking boots. This was my first introduction to Gloria Clouse, Muddy Sneakers' Board President. A few months later I was awarded the Director position. On my first day, it was Gloria who greeted me at the office, ready to help.

From that day until recently, Gloria Clouse has been my right hand. Any credit given to me for leading Muddy Sneakers these last four years I feel must be shared. Having essentially served as Executive Director herself for six months prior to my arrival, there was nothing about the organization she did not know. Pulling from her years of experience as an elementary principal in her home state of Ohio, Gloria led Muddy Sneakers through difficult times and faced those challenges with total confidence. Most importantly, it was Gloria's passion for teaching and love of

the outdoors that made her the woman for the job when Muddy Sneakers needed focus, reassurance and vision. Fiscally conservative by nature (and at times, necessity) and yet always inspired to pursue new strategies that could result in serving more students and bringing the experience to those children who needed it most. An avid hiker, I came to quickly learn that Friday mornings were her time in the woods and that meetings would have to wait (unless I could catch her at Sunrise Cafe).

Thank You Gloria!

This past January, Gloria stepped down as Board President after five years of leadership. It was the right time and she left the organization in a much better place. Muddy Sneakers is also pleased to announce David Watkins of Brevard, NC as the new Board President. David brings with him extensive business experience, familiarity in growing non-profits, a thoughtful approach and trusted leadership. The Muddy Sneakers Board is in very good hands with David at the helm.

Please join me now in celebrating Gloria Clouse as she steps into the Treasurer's role and continues her support of the organization as it begins a new and exciting chapter. From the entire Muddy Sneakers staff and board of directors, THANK YOU Gloria for your tireless support and for reminding us always of the important role we play in the lives of the students we work to inspire.

Ryan Olson
Executive Director



Update on the NC State University/Muddy Sneakers Environmental Literacy Research Project

Beginning August 2015, Muddy Sneakers entered into an exciting partnership with researchers at NC State University. NCSU is helping Muddy Sneakers complete a rigorous evaluation of its program, seeking to measure impacts on student science learning, connection with nature, and environmental literacy. Our team of academics set out to also answer some lingering questions like "How do diverse groups of students respond to outdoor education differently?" and "How best to measure environmental literacy with elementary school students?"

This project is truly a collaborative effort. The NCSU research team is headed by Kathryn Stevenson, PhD, masters student Rachel Szczytko and Nils Peterson, PhD (all in the Dept. of Fisheries, Wildlife & Conservation Biology). Additionally, the project's advisory team includes Environmental Education (EE) veteran Renee Strand and Susan Moore, PhD (both in Dept. of Forestry and Environmental Resources), Howard Bondell, PhD (Dept. of Statistics), John Nietfeld, PhD (Educational Psychology), and finally Sarah Carrier, PhD (College of Education - Elementary Science). The NCSU team is in weekly contact with Muddy Sneakers. In addition to significant involvement from the organization's administration, a few of their senior field instructors have also provided invaluable insight including Ben Nelson, Molly Gillespie and Ryan Lubbers.



Our team's primary focus to date has been educating ourselves on the program followed by a multi-month process where the focus shifted to developing a draft survey for teachers and students. Currently, every 2015-16 partnering MS school is working to complete that draft survey. We will use data collected from this process to further refine the survey in preparation for the 2016-17 school year, when it is our intention to administer pre- and post-MS surveys to all participating students and teachers across the program area.

All involved are excited to share lessons learned and data collected from this project with other educators and researchers in NC as well as across the country. This summer, staff from Muddy Sneakers and NCSU will attend a workshop on conservation psychology at Antioch University in Keane, NH. We will also present at the Environmental Educators of NC Conference in Black Mountain this September followed by the North American Association of Environmental Education conference in Madison, Wisconsin in October.

-Kathryn Stevenson, Lead Investigator

Welcome New Field Instructors and Camp MS Co-Director

Muddy Sneakers is proud to present its Fall 2015 incoming class of field instructors:

Ruby Compton developed her naturalist and experiential education training working with organizations like Nature's Classroom and serving as a mentor with Green River Preserve summer camp. In addition to working for Muddy Sneakers, Ruby is the Summer Camp Program Director at Green River Preserve.

Deborah Davis grew up exploring the mountains and creeks of western North Carolina. During her 21 years of teaching science in Greenville, SC, Deborah implemented two environmental education programs. Deborah would say she has found her dream job because Muddy Sneakers allows her to combine her passion for the outdoors with her expertise in teaching science.

Rachel Shopper grew up in coastal Massachusetts and found her way to WNC while pursuing permaculture education in Asheville. Rachel, who holds an English degree from Wesleyan University, later came to realize her passion was in connecting people with the natural world. Rachel has also attended a wilderness awareness school where she studied naturalist skills and community building. In addition to Muddy Sneakers, Rachel teaches part-time for Asheville's Forest Floor program.

In addition, **Carlisle Rankin** accepted a year-round position as the Camp Muddy Sneakers Co-Director and will be helping to make a seamless transition into the summer camp season. Carlisle is a native of NC who returned to the Blue Ridge Mountains after three years teaching third grade in Nashville, TN and has been a Muddy Sneakers Field Instructor since 2014. Carlisle is thrilled to meld her teaching and counseling skills and her work with Muddy Sneakers into a Camp Muddy Sneakers leadership role beginning Summer 2016.





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Don't forget to register your rising 1st-7th grader for Camp Muddy Sneakers this summer! We are excited to offer new field sites this year with programming in Transylvania, Henderson and Buncombe Counties.
www.campmuddysneakers.org

Join the Movement!

The Muddy Sneakers annual donor program was named after what we believe our supporters want most – the opportunity to directly invest in existing and expanded student participation. **A \$50 sponsorship ensures a student's participation for a full year!** With your help, more students will have the opportunity to connect with nature, increase their appreciation of science and experience the joy of learning outside.

www.muddysneakers.org

