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Students get down and dirty with Muddy Sneakers



Photo/Carter Giegerich

Muddy Sneakers field instructor Carlton Burke helps MVI students set up a field experiment before heading into the woods at the Tessentee Bottomlands Preserve.

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The fifth-grade classes at Mountain View Intermediate have been getting muddy all year, thanks to the school's partnership with Muddy Sneakers, a Brevard-based outdoor education group.

Over the course of six sessions with Muddy Sneakers, the classes at MVI have been getting hands-on experience with a range of different scientific fields they've been studying, applying what they've learned in the classroom to the natural world in Macon County.

"On every expedition,

there's a focus on a science unit that ties into the North Carolina Essential Standards for Science," said Deborah Davis, interim Western North Carolina program director for Muddy Sneakers. "That's what they learn in the classroom all the time, but the idea is to do hands-on activities in an outdoor setting. It allows the students to be field scientists."

The outdoor programs help make conceptual coursework stick in students' minds, according to MVI science teacher Lori Castner.

"We did one based on force and motion, and the cool thing is we were talking about

speed and various things like that over the course of a couple weeks, and during activities we'd be discussing things and they would refer back to the experiences they had here," Castner said.

On April 27, the fifth graders visited the Tessentee Bottomlands Preserve, a property owned by Mainspring Conservation Trust, to study the conservation and transfer of energy in the natural world. Students conducted numerous experiments throughout the day, learning about how heat transfer and insulation is a critical part of the life

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cycles of the plants, animals and insects found throughout the preserve, from water babies and caterpillars to a king snake the group found on their walk around the property.

The Muddy Sneakers expeditions all feature structured experiments for the students, but Davis said there are always opportunities for exploration and expansion when students and instructors happen upon some unexpected creature or peculiarity in the woods.

"Science is about asking questions and being curious, and when you find something the kids just start asking questions," Davis said. "Things happen along the way that you're not expecting, and you incorporate that into whatever you're teaching."

This is the 10th year Muddy Sneakers has offered programs in Western North Carolina's school systems, but the first time they've

been able to branch out as far as Macon County. The program started in Transylvania County and remained fairly small for several years, but it has since grown to include 13 counties with an additional office in Salisbury as of two years ago. When Castner found out she could bring the group to work with her students, she said it was a mad dash to pull funding together in time for the first expedition.

"I scrambled to get the money. I didn't find out they'd even come this far until the end of May, so we didn't get started until late October," she said. "I wrote grants, we got some funding from Mainspring and some from the University of Georgia. The PTO gave us some and the STEM program, too. I had to piece it all together."

Castner said she was already working on next year's program, though, and she hoped to see the relationship with Muddy Sneakers continue to grow in the school



Press photo/Carter Giegerich

Muddy Sneakers field instructor Carlton Burke works with MVI students.

system. She said the program did wonders for showing students a connection to the natural world, which Davis said is one of the main goals of the program throughout the

western part of the state.

"Our goal is to awaken something in them that inspires curiosity and show them something they saw in the classroom in a whole

new way," Davis said. "We want to connect them to the natural world. You take care of what you love, and we're trying to foster a love for the outdoors."