



(Above and bottom left) Ira B. Jones Elementary students hiking at Bent Creek Experimental Forest. Photo by Capturing WNC Photography



(Above) Vance Elementary student with a snail. (Below) Vance Elementary students with instructor Ryan Lubbers. Photos by Muddy Sneakers



MUDDY SNEAKERS



BY EMMA CASTLEBERRY

Seven years ago, working mother Hope Janowitz was having a hard time finding stimulating summer programs for her first-grader, Hannah. A friend told Janowitz about Camp Muddy Sneakers, and it began a lifelong love for little Hannah. “Hannah enjoyed every part of the summer program, so much so that she did three weeks of it the first summer she participated,” says Janowitz. “She loved hiking to different locales everyday, she loved having a ‘camp name,’ turning over rocks in the water, having ‘Bee Drills’ and tasting sweet birch.” Based out of Brevard, Muddy Sneakers is an outdoor science education program that partners with more than 2,800 students at 43 different public schools in the western and Piedmont regions of North Carolina. The program’s primary function is to provide hands-on, outdoor classroom experiences to fifth-grade public school students as an enhancement to their state science curriculum. Camp Muddy Sneakers, an outgrowth of the school year program, began six years ago in an effort to provide year-round outdoor experiences while serving a wider age range of young explorers.

In addition to Camp Muddy Sneakers, Hannah also participated in the Muddy Sneakers program with her fifth-grade class at Pisgah Forest Elementary School. “Having the chance to experience, apply and observe first-hand the science they were also learning in the classroom seemed to help both Hannah and her classmates retain and better appreciate what they were studying,” says Janowitz. “Both Muddy Sneakers’ summer day camp and fifth grade in-school programs provide children with opportunities to experience and interact

with the world around them and teach them to be good stewards of the earth and her resources.”

Ryan Olson, executive director of Muddy Sneakers, says this is the program’s intended purpose. “Our hope is that Muddy Sneakers will develop a more engaged citizenship, connected to these natural areas and maybe even compelled to steward them in the future,” he says. “Muddy Sneakers hopes that students will come away from their experience with an enhanced sense of place



Vance Elementary students with instructor Ryan Lubbers. Photos by Muddy Sneakers

and also the desire to learn and experience more from the natural spaces that surround their communities. It is this love of inquiry that we seek to cultivate.”

Muddy Sneakers began as a pilot program in 2007 with students from Brevard and Pisgah Forest Elementary Schools. “From its inception, the founding board members of Muddy Sneakers sought to create a replicable educational program that worked within the existing school system in hopes of it eventually growing beyond WNC,” says Olson. In 2016, Muddy Sneakers expanded beyond their Brevard home office to open a second field office in Salisbury, serving the Piedmont region.

Olson says the program’s “portability” is one of its greatest features, and communities nation-wide have



Ira B. Jones Elementary students at Bent Creek Experimental Forest up close. Photo by Capturing WNC Photography

reached out with questions about bringing Muddy Sneakers to their area. “We believe this work is incredibly important and should not be limited to those students lucky enough to live in the two regions of NC we currently serve,” he says. “We have a true responsibility to our youth to ensure they all have the opportunity to connect with the natural world at an early age, to use that experience to have balance in their life and to know it as a place of education, exploration, refuge and inspiration. Regardless if your backyard is Pisgah National Forest or a pocket park in downtown Asheville, there is nature everywhere and with it comes the opportunity for connection.”

Kat Scala, a field instructor with Muddy Sneakers, says witnessing this connection—which she calls “the ‘aha’ moment”—is the best part of her job. “You can see the light spark in their face and the joy spread,” she says. Scala says the Muddy Sneakers program has provided students with confidence, especially those who might struggle in the classroom. “They often excel in our program and believe in themselves just a little more,” she says. “I have also seen students gain leadership skills, become more confident and learn that we, as humans, are part of something much bigger than ourselves.” This personal development is a vital part of the Muddy Sneakers curriculum. “Muddy Sneakers is not just a science education program, it is a holistic child learning experience,” Scala says. “Yes, we teach science but we also build confidence, allow students who don’t perform well in the classroom to blossom, foster creativity and

create a bond between students and our natural world.”

Olson says this is the sort of educational opportunity that helps define a healthy community—one where a child’s mental and physical well-being is prioritized. “We often refer to Muddy Sneakers as ‘pattern interrupt,’ a well-documented strategy for student success where the learning environment is changed, student roles are sometimes reversed, and the natural environment creates a more level playing field for student success,” he says. Muddy Sneakers provides a break from the typical indoor, non-experiential learning environment. Student impacts that have been reported as a result of Muddy Sneakers include better attention both in the field and back in the classroom; significant improvement in female student academic performance and general interest in the science material; and improved behavior. Additionally, most partnering schools have seen an increase in fifth grade science end-of-grade (EOG) scores since participating in Muddy Sneakers.

“Muddy Sneakers understands the barriers that exist for many children and through school partnership, we are able to bring the wonders only found in nature to students of every walk of life,” says Olson. “We believe that reconnecting youth with nature must be a critical priority for all those that care about not only the environment, but also the health and well being of our populace.”

For more information, visit MuddySneakers.org.