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## Uwharrie ← L I F E → Connecting students to nature

By Jon Galloway

The classroom is a place designated for learning. When learning about nature and the many sciences associated with nature, getting outdoors is an alternative to the typical classroom setting. Muddy Sneakers, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, does just that.

The group of educators, led by program director Elize Tellez, travel throughout the Piedmont area engaging fifth-grade students with hands-on outdoor learning. During the school year, Muddy Sneakers works with fifth-grade students in Montgomery County for six outdoor-learning days, weather permitting. The curriculum they use is aligned with N.C. Essential Standards for Science and builds a better understanding of the scientific process. Development of leadership skill and learning to

be comfortable and safe outdoors is also a benefit of the program.

On May 21, 53 fifth-grade students from Green Ridge Elementary in Biscoe made the trip to King's Mountain Point to learn about the weather. "We are all about getting fifth graders connected to nature and to the science curriculum," Tellez stated. Working out of the home base in Brevard, the Muddy Sneakers program has been getting youngsters outdoors in North Carolina for 11 years – but has been in the Piedmont for the past three years.

"We enjoy getting to know these kids and see them light up when they get outdoors," Tellez stated. "We are getting them outdoors on land that is essentially theirs." According to their web site, the mission of Muddy Sneakers is "To awaken in children a deeply felt con-



LOVING IT – From left, Josue De Los Angeles, Grayson Brewer and Milton Dunlap pay attention to instructor Emily Hitzfelder of Muddy Sneakers.

nection with the natural world – one that inspires curiosity, stimulates learning and brings life to the classroom performance." As the year progresses, Tellez said she sees a difference in the students.

"At first, some of them are genuinely hesitant –

a little nervous," Tellez noted. "A lot of them are not spending a lot of time outdoors these days. By the end, you see a lot of excitement in their faces. They get more comfortable with the outdoors and engage in the science that is being taught. They are get-

ting a hands-on real life experience with us out in the field. When they get back into the class, the teachers can reference what they learned out here and are able to talk more about it."

As the children broke up into groups of about 10, each instructor moved to a different area to begin the day's topic of weather. One of the activities for the day was documenting the weather throughout the day – temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction as well as identifying cloud types.

The other topics were the water cycle, correlation between density and temperature, using oil and water to better understand density, fronts (or how air masses collide), the jet stream and then at the end, a time to reflect and pen their individual experience with poetry. Emily Hitzfelder is a core field instructor for the Piedmont region of Muddy Sneakers, having 10 Green Ridge

students in her group. After a time of group introduction and questions, Hitzfelder asked if the students remembered what was in the backpack that the students use during their daily activities with Muddy Sneakers. Josue De Los Angeles raised his hand. "Two magnifying glasses, two sitting pads and two compasses," he stated.

Jaidyn Chriscoe was making her third trip out with Muddy Sneakers. What she likes best about the classes is, "I like to be outdoors and I like nature."

That's exactly what the instructors want to hear from the students. They want them to learn to enjoy the outdoors and realize, particularly in Montgomery County, that they have access to the Uwharrie National Forest and other areas where learning about nature is just a short drive away – not to mention all the fun they can have while learning.



PREPARING FOR THE DAY – Ten Green Ridge Elementary school fifth-grade students learned about weather and nature May 21 at King's Mountain Point.