



The Great Outdoors

Each year the middle school students are able to learn things through first-hand experiences when they embark upon the fall Outdoor Classroom trips. Each adventure is tailored to their specific curriculum to ensure that they are applying learned principles through these three-to-five day adventures.

Recently, the sixth grade students traveled to the 4-H center on Jekyll Island with Miss Laura Bragdon and Miss Amanda Ebersole. The seventh grade students visited Blue Ridge Outdoor Education Center with Mr. Craig Ham, and Mr. Craig Johnson took the eighth-graders to Washington, D.C.

The sixth grade students learned about island ecology, herpetology, ornithology, and coastal ecosystems, with chaperones Rob Woods, George Robertson, Charlie Malarkey, Glenn Barinowski, Beth Gore and Kim Barfield. They had a wonderful time, despite the rainy conditions. "We stayed in an old hotel that has been re-purposed as a 4-H center focusing on educational trips. The accommodations provided for six to seven students and one chaperone per room. The teaching groups were about 12 children and two chaperones, and each group was provided a Jekyll staff member," said Miss Ebersole.

Miss Bragdon shared some examples of hands-on learning, including an activity in which the students learned about nocturnal animals and their ability to see colors. She said, "The students were given colored markers in the dark and wrote on paper, then asked by the 4-H teacher what color was on the paper. Every student could see that they had the wrong answer when the lights came on. It was a great way for them to understand the way that nocturnal mammals differ from those that see in sunlight."

"Most of the children had never been exposed to the beach as an ecosystem. They didn't understand how it works together with the outlying environment. It was a way to experience the beach in a new light," remarked Miss Ebersole. One of the activities involved eating a plant from the marsh, a sea pickle, which is incredibly salty. "It helped to reinforce that the source of the marsh is the ocean," explained Miss Bragdon. The trip was not without some fun and adventure though. "I will always remember walking around in the marsh and watching one

of my classmates fall in the mud!" said Clae Barinowski, laughingly.

For the last 15 years, sixth grade students at Westminster have embarked on the Jekyll Island trip but there are some changes to come. Miss Ebersole shared, "One exciting change is that next year the students will be staying for an extra day to perform a service project by partnering with local churches." What a great way to get even more out of a wonderful experience!

At the Blue Ridge Outdoor Education Center, the seventh grade students enjoyed the mountain air while learning about ecology and environmental awareness. The center is a program of Camp Mikell and Conference Center, which is nestled in the hills at the southern edge of the Chattahoochee National Forest outside of Toccoa, Ga.

The highlights of this year's trip included a white water rafting trip on the Chattooga River, a high ropes adventure, and an exciting Underground Railroad history simulation. Nearly every activity focused on team building along with ecology studies and environmental awareness. Chaperones accompanying Mr. Ham were Mrs. Connie Reynolds and Col. Dave Budinger.

On the first day, the students got to know the Blue Ridge staff, learned about the camp facility rules, and participated in some team building activities. During the next few days, the students were split into field groups and took turns going rafting, participating in learning classrooms, and even braving the ropes course.

When asked why he loves Outdoor Classroom, Mr. Ham shared, "The idea of an Outdoor Classroom or outdoor school is for students to live in and experience what they are learning in the classroom." With his love of the outdoors and passion for learning, Mr. Ham captured this experience in his web blog. You can see more about this trip at: sites.wsa.net/outdoorclassroom.

On the trip to Washington, D.C., our eighth grade students learned about our nation's history through trips to museums and other historic landmarks, but also enjoyed a first-hand point of view by meeting with alumnus, Robert Watts, who works with Representative Phil Gingrey (GA). Watts set up a meeting with Rep. Gingrey and shared his experiences as a staffer with our students. Chaperones were Upper School Principal, Mr. Craig Johnson; History teacher, Mr. Glenn Bell; Miss Virginia Wright and Miss Cassie Dankovich from youth staff at First



Seventh grade students take on the ropes course.

Presbyterian Church; and parents Eric Newbrey, Matt Willis and Kimberly Knox.

"One of the big learning highlights of this particular trip is visiting the Holocaust museum," said Mr. Johnson. "It is a powerful experience for the kids. It demands your attention and introduces you to the world of what Nazi Germany was really like."

As previously mentioned, another high point this year was the meeting with Mr. Watts and Rep. Gingrey. (*You can see more about Robert Watts on page 12 of this issue*) The congressman shared about striving for, setting and achieving goals. "Robert was a good example of how our students can roll up their sleeves and succeed when they work hard toward their goals," said Mr. Johnson.

Another particularly moving experience was the visit to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Mr. Johnson appreciated the students' ability to be still and take in the meaning of what was going on around them. "A lot of what we do in our nation's capitol encourages reverence of the people that have gone before us. A visit to D.C. is kind of a way to walk through and to give honor to the past. We visited the Arlington Cemetery, and the students observed the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Our

students even provided a wreath to honor those soldiers. When students participate in something like that, they are quiet and peaceful, just taking in the respectful nature of that ceremony. They have to get outside of themselves and look who has gone before. They see fresh tombs and grave sites, and that is a moment for them to realize what others, even in recent history, have given up," he shared.

Overall, both students and teachers alike get more out of the outdoor classroom than can be communicated on paper. Westminster is proud to offer this kind of education every year for middle school students so that each student can apply learning in a fun way and bond with their teachers and fellow classmates.



Claire Zecha, Ellyn Strother, Cassie Dankovich, Rebecca McGrahee, Emily Doumar, Caitlyn Newbrey in Representative Paul Broun's office.