

Environmental Education Program is a highlight for all ages

by Bree Kotolski, News Editor

For more than 20 years, the Environmental Education (EE) Program has been changing lives for students and teachers in the Tri-County Area School District. From high school counselors spending time preparing and teaching lesson plans to 4-year-old-kindergarten students on their first ever trip to the 400-acre school forest, children of all ages have come to love the program.

High school students spend 6-7 weeks of their summer in the school forest training to be EE counselors. From learning more about the environment themselves to creating lesson plans and implementing them is only part of why many past and current counselors enjoyed their summers of training. Most will tell you the friendships they made with their classmates and the older counselors was the biggest highlight of the summer.

Katie Sullivan, a 2006 graduate and former EE counselor said her best memory from EE was her entire summer of training before her junior year in high school. "Our group of juniors were so close that every day was entertaining and it felt more like summer camp than a learning experience," said Sullivan.

As many former students stated in recent interviews, the Tri-County EE program is more than just a field trip for students. "It's a chance to get kids out into the world without a screen in front of their face for a few hours," said Brielle Cummings, a 2010 graduate and former EE counselor. "Teaching students about the environment around them in a hands-on way, allows for a better understanding of what is often lost in text or strictly classroom settings."

The approach used in Tri-County's Environmental Education program is unique in the state and has attracted attention from state organizations such as LEAF, a partnership between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources-Division of Forestry and the UWSP Center for Environmental Education, where a former EE counselor now works.

The peer-to-peer teaching approach is a major highlight for the elementary students as they look up to



Tri-County senior and second-year counselor Eric Buechner helped kindergartener Logan Calderon with a leaf rubbing during a recent indoor program. The students were unable to go to the school forest due to rain, so the counselors brought the program to them.

the high school-aged students. "I wanted to become an EE counselor because I always loved going on the trips and learning about the environment and I wanted to be a part of such a great program," said Eric Buechner, a high school senior and current EE counselor.

Megan Chojnacki, a 2014 graduate and former EE counselor added, "I always had such a good time on field trips in elementary school, so when I had the option to become a counselor, the decision was easy."

The counselors begin preparing for each school forest trip two weeks in advance and the work doesn't stop there. Counselors learn many things throughout their years in the program, from how to work with each other and younger students to first aid and CPR. The counselors have a vast knowledge of plants, animals and habitats by the end of their summer training and that knowledge continues to grow for years to come.

"Our high school counselors dedicate a significant amount of time and effort into taking on this large responsibility. Each of them give up substantial time to participate in a multiple-week training and preparation program to ready them for this leadership position," said 7-12 principal Nicholas Marti. "On top of this, they miss several school days - or portions of days - to assist in carrying out our various student field trips to our school forest each fall and spring," he added.

Marti said he is very impressed with the counselors as they manage all of it and make it seem quite effortless.

Counselors learn how to communicate with the teachers, create letters to send home to parents, make sure transportation is arranged for each trip and that all supplies are available and ready to go to the school forest.

"I am always very impressed with the preparation done by the counselors and Mr. Raboin and appreciate the excellent role models they provide for our 5th grade students," said 5th and 6th grade teacher Colleen Przybylski.

As many of the past counselors said, it would be impossible to list everything that they had learned throughout their years in the EE program, but it was worth all of the hard work and preparation time.

"The things that stuck with me the most are independent working skills, accepting responsibility for mistakes, a deeper love for the outdoors and a wealth of species identification," said Brittany Wecker, a 2009 graduate and former EE counselor. "My friends still send me photos of various wildlife asking me to identify them."

Many students in the EE program are also in other activities offered at the school, so time management is a big part of what they learn throughout their years in the program as well. "Balancing sports and school was always challenging, but having to complete assignments before missing class, then go teach other lessons and return the next day without missing a step was a carefully crafted art," said Cummings.

This year, with seven new counselors and seven returning, the program continues to thrive and be a highlight for all ages; from elementary and middle school students who look forward to their time outside of the classroom to teachers and counselors enjoying the children's reactions when learning new information.

"I love teaching little kids about new things, how their faces light up when they learn something new or exciting. I love seeing that reaction," said first year EE counselor, Alesia Betro.

Elementary children enjoy the change of learning environment and staff members enjoy the academic benefits of all the lessons taught by the counselors while at the school forest. "Students perceive the school forest as a field trip. It's a win/win," said Early Childhood-6th grade principal Shawn Jepson.

Second grade teacher Jackie Sigourney added, "I enjoy taking the kids out of the classroom and into nature. Even though we live in a rural area, many students have little knowledge of our environment."

The new EE counselors expressed their excitement for the coming school year and the first of many trips to the school forest in which they will be the teachers. They each spoke about how they hoped the year would go and what they wanted the elementary students to take away from each trip.

"I want them to have a fun, learning experience. I'm hoping they can appreciate the outdoors and how lucky they are to have such a beautiful place nearby," said first year EE counselor Rheyra Heiden.

Not only are the counselors excited to teach the students this year, but they are also excited to learn more themselves as the school year and forest trips continue. "I am excited to learn new things that will help make other students' time at the forest as exciting and as memorable as it was for me," said first-year EE counselor Haley Kramer.

Kaylee Lockhart, another first-year EE counselor added, "I am looking forward to learning about wildlife and forestry, and interacting with younger students and fellow counselors."

Przybylski polled her 5th grade students to see what it was that they enjoyed most about their trips to the school forest and received responses including: "I love to be outside all day," and "I like that we are learning and don't even know it."

According to Przybylski, many teachers use the fall trips to build their classroom teams as the activities are geared to help students gain skills in leadership and cooperation and to help teachers/staff create common bonds with the students that they can refer to as their year together continues.

Przybylski added, "I love the opportunity to interact with my students in a different setting, it helps me to see new things and know them better. I also enjoy seeing former students shine as counselors."

The list of activities the counselors teach to students each year continues to grow, but many former counselors agreed on their favorite activities, the peppermint beetle. The activity involved students trying to figure out what they were smelling in old film canisters and then they tried to track down the peppermint beetle by sniffing tree trunks.

"My favorite activity to teach was the peppermint beetle and watching all the kids (and some teachers) sniffing trees and trying to track the path of the dreaded peppermint beetles," said Sullivan.

Teachers stated how fortunate the district is to have the program for the students, both learning and teaching. "We are truly blessed to have such an amazing



Tri-County senior and second-year counselor Elizabeth Nigh taught kindergarten students how to make a bird feeder using a plastic bottle and a thin wooden dowel during a recent indoor Environmental Education program.

program for our youth. It is fun and educational," said Sigourney. "We also have access to wildlife habitats, which is not possible to do in the classroom."

Regarding what students learn and take away from the program, Marti said, "I believe that the notable efforts spent in building a foundation of knowledge, preparing for successful trip experiences, and, ultimately, carrying out and reflecting upon each respective trip provides our counselors with unique and tremendously valuable opportunities to develop leadership skills to take with them when they leave Tri-County."

Marti added, "the confidence they gain in going through this experience will carry with them throughout their lives." The program has led countless students to careers in natural resources or in education.

Many parents, teachers, students and alumni agree that the school forest and the Environmental Education program are a huge asset to the Tri-County School District. Remembering the fun they had while at the school forest puts a smile on the faces of many.

"Tri-County has a very unique learning environment in our school forest. Our community members have been very supportive in the maintenance and care of the entire school forest area," said Jepson, "The school forest is a wonderful bridge between the community and school."

As one EE counselor said at the end of her interview, students highly value the opportunities they were afforded as a counselor and/or student in the program. "The real value of this program is the impact made on elementary and middle school students. The best place to learn about science and nature is in it," said Jackie Cleereman, a 2011 graduate and former counselor.

She also recalled being excited about the trips as a young elementary student and as a counselor wanted to get other students as excited about nature as she was. "Who wouldn't want to be outside on a 70-degree day in early October, or any day for that matter?"

Despite the rainy weather we have had over the past few weeks, the Tri-County EE program has been able to take a few trips to the school forest while two classes were unable to go. When weather isn't the best and the students cannot go to the forest, the EE counselors bring the forest to them.



Tri-County senior and second-year counselor Katie Craig asked students if they knew what type of bird was pictured on each card.