

PortlandTribune

GUEST OPINION

Let's make the world like Outdoor School

MY VIEW • School budget cuts threaten to take 'outdoorsy-ness' out of our kids

BY RACHEL BYRON-LAW

, May 26, 2011

"Oh, you're from Portland. That's why you're so ... outdoorsy," said a friend to me as I stoked a backyard campfire in the heart of Brooklyn, N.Y.

I laughed as he said it, but the comment made me wonder. Any number of "strange" things about me could be credited to my Portland upbringing: I make lifestyle choices with the Earth in mind, I like to sing folk songs around campfires, and I value community and work to build it wherever I go.

But what is it that makes us Portlanders so darned "outdoorsy?" The truth is, we are city dwellers. Yes, my parents dragged me on hikes to waterfalls as a child, but even if I hadn't been so privileged, I would still know what it is to appreciate the natural world. Because I am from Portland, I went to Outdoor School.

We should be proud of Portland's Outdoor School program. Not only is it incredibly successful, it is also the oldest in the country. Our program began in 1966. Well before the first Earth Day was celebrated, sixth-graders from Portland were leaving the city behind for a week in the woods. They discovered a world that can be difficult to learn from textbooks — following animal tracks through a forest, feeling the difference between subsoil and topsoil, identifying native Oregon trees, and testing water quality. At night they sang around campfires and by day they worked together building an intentional community, where every kind of person is accepted.

Traditions have changed, lessons have altered, but the spirit remains the same. Every week of the spring and fall, sixth-graders from distant corners of Portland come together to learn outside, where they watch spores poof from a fungi, dissect a salmon from a clean river and get their hands in the mud.

Children who don't feel successful in the four walls of a classroom discover they can achieve academically, too. Kids who are lost in broken families or the hallways of crowded schools discover that their student leaders care about them and want them to succeed.

Students from both ends of Portland's socioeconomic spectrum, from urban neighborhoods and suburban subdivisions, from immigrant backgrounds and old Portland families, come together to form a true community, wherein each person has a role and everyone is treated with love and respect. The high school student leaders give up a week of their lives because they love to forget about themselves and live for their sixth-graders, thinking every moment how to teach, mentor and care for young people who they had never even met.

No wonder so many students cry at the week's end, not wanting to leave. They've had a taste of something different, a beautiful way to live. The only consolation we can offer is the promise that they can return in four years, as a high school student leader.

I will never forget how hard it was for me as a senior, back in 2002, when I knew it was my last week. Anyone who has lived this magic knows that it is simultaneously indescribable and invaluable. How to even come back to the cold streets of the city after a week like this? How to explain to the world back home that something has been lost in our urban society, something precious, that we have had a glimpse of something better?

All over the world, the trend is the same: loss of rural lifestyle, move to the city. Yes, we like these things we have built for ourselves, but these are not the things that actually sustain us as humans. Not only is it beautiful to learn about plants, animals, soil and water, but it is also necessary to know about the things that keep us alive. By relegating nature to an extracurricular activity as a society, what are we losing? And are we willing to lose it entirely?

When the news came last week that Portland and Gresham plan to shrink Outdoor School to a



L.E. BASKOW / TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO
Despite protests, the Portland School Board voted this week to shrink Outdoor School from five days to three, to save \$625,000 from next year's budget. Other districts are also reducing or eliminating Outdoor School for students in a third year of state education funding shortfalls.

three-day program, and that Parkrose and David Douglas are cutting it entirely, I literally became sick to my stomach. It is not possible to cram the magic of Outdoor School into three days.

Forgive me for saying it because I understand that times are tough, but I wonder if people making these hard decisions realize that Outdoor School is not a long field trip – it is an essential part of what makes us Portlanders. If we aren't raising our children to be "outdoorsy," then they won't be. If we don't value programs that teach children to value what keeps us alive, then they won't, either. If we don't provide high school students with opportunities to be excellent role models, then they won't rise.

The question is not, "How can we cut down Outdoor School?" The question is, "How do we make the rest of our world like Outdoor School?"

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Leading the way through volunteering

By Gosia Wozniacka, The Oregonian
June 27, 2009, 8:00PM

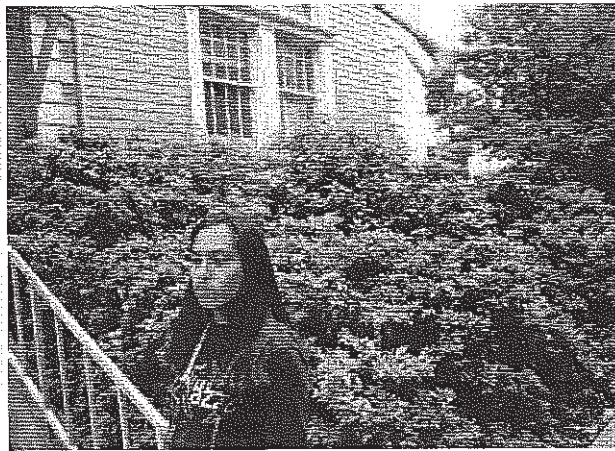


Photo by Carlie Deltoro

On a brisk spring morning, Mariela Miller found herself surrounded by tall Douglas Firs, lost on a hike with six students.

Instead of panicking and telling them they were lost, she made a lesson out of it. She pulled out the map and had a student lead the way back to the base camp of Outdoor School, right outside of Sandy, Ore.

From this, she learned that no matter what challenges she faces, there's always a way. Being a leader at Outdoor School taught Mariela to be an independent person and to take charge of a situation.

"It's heartwarming seeing people receive help," said Mariela, 16, a senior at Cleveland High School in Portland. "The smile on their faces is rewarding."

Download MP3 here.

For one week each spring, Mariela mentors and leads eight girls in a cabin. She wakes them up at 7 every morning, takes them to breakfast and shepherds them to activities such as communal campfires and field study classes on water, soil and nature.

Mariela loves watching the kids grow and learn to love Outdoor School, just as she did when she first attended as a sixth-grader.

During her junior year as a student leader, Mariela's partner threw out her hip on the first day of camp. As a result, Mariela was left alone with the eight girls, who she thought hated her.

"Before, I was just a follower," said Mariela, as she shared what she called her "single parent" experience. "Being a leader of eight girls made me a leader."

Mariela hopes to continue with Outdoor School in college by working one-on-one with children who have special needs.

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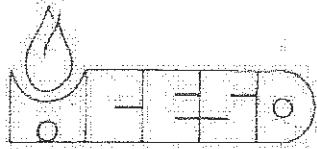
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NEWSLETTER

McCall toasts 100,000th



Former Governor Tom McCall presents a plaque to sixth grader Shannon Blaser, the 100,000th student to attend Multnomah Outdoor School. McCall and State School Superintendent Verne Duncan were among the guests attending the ceremony at Camp Howard October 20.

Alternative classrooms flourish...
see page 6.

It began at one leased church camp over 16 years ago. One hundred thousand students later, Outdoor School continues bringing Multnomah County students to nature.

Former Governor Tom McCall, State Superintendent of Schools Verne Duncan and a contingent of program founders gathered at Camp Howard October 20 to celebrate the 100,000th sixth grade student milestone.

McCall applauded the Outdoor Education program and the environmental awareness it instills in students. "This school is vital to our state's future because here the student can see that just one person's effect on the environment is representative of society's impact on the environment," McCall told the students and the news media.

"All of us pray that outdoor schools won't suddenly become environmental frills, especially in light of tax limitation efforts," he said. "It is really worthwhile to have this kind of sense, understanding and appreciation in your blood so that the causes so meaningful to Oregon have knowledgeable advocates."

"Don't you doubt Oregon's heritage," he told the students. "With the balanced view of the economy and the environment that you have gained as a result of this school, you know that this balance is vital to making Oregon the livability state of all the Union."

"(The program) has swept me off my feet—the concept, the success, and what it means down the line in terms of a viable, healthy, wonderful, green Oregon."

As of the end of fall term, 101,217 sixth-graders had sampled outdoor school. Some 17,974 high school students, acting as cabin-group counselors, have also benefited from the program.

Closure network operating

The School Announcement Network is now in operation. School closures from now until March 11 will be relayed to the following radio and television stations:

AM:

KGW 620
KYTE 970
KYXI 1520
KEX 1190
KUPL 1330
KCNR 1410
KXL 750
KKSJ 910
KWJJ 1080

FM:

KINK 102
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