

Outdoor School: Portland's Special "Something"

By Chiara Forrester

Most communities have something that makes them special. Something that helps to expand the horizons and to foster the ideals of its citizens. For Portland, this "something" has been around for over 45 years. Everyone knows about it, and most take it for granted. This is Outdoor School, a place that is deeply a part of our community, but at the same time a seemingly separate world.

Outdoor School is a program run by the Multnomah Education Service District that serves Portland, Corbett, and David Douglas School District sixth graders. An important part of the district's science curriculum, this program is accessible to all students at participating schools, regardless of their own individual financial situations. Students receive a week of hands-on, small group learning, where kids who are not successful in a traditional classroom setting often discover academic confidence and succeed.

As student leader Sarah "Bess" Hulmes explains, "They are handed rocks and plants and fungi and can observe and feel. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel? These questions are not asked of them in the classroom and their eyes light up as their minds race to find new observations. You can see the magic happen, though it cannot be captured in words or even photos. They are changing in ways that cannot be conceived".

Sixth graders also take part in, and help to create, a community like no other. This community is hard to describe to those who have never experienced it, but the word "magic" is often used. It is a community where acceptance, love, and the ability to be oneself is fostered. Kim Silva, the director of Friends of Outdoor School, a non-profit which helps to provide funding for the program says, "I was told by a friend that ODS was the only place she felt safe as a child. She lived in a home with a volatile alcoholic father, so she never really rested, except at ODS... I've heard kids say that the only place they get to eat as much as they want and get personal time with an adult is at ODS".

As a high school student leader, I have taken many kids on their first hike at Outdoor School. I have witnessed the transformation a student undergoes when they are heard, respected, and allowed to use all of their senses to learn. I've received letters from my students saying

“Phototropism rocks!”. I have witnessed kids learning how to love learning, and how to love themselves. I have begun to understand the connection between a campfire and a child’s sense of place.

This program not only changes the lives of many sixth graders, but also the lives of many high school student leaders, who are responsible for teaching field studies and for caring for a cabin of students. The staff at Outdoor School hold us to high expectations. One of the common observations that student leaders share with each other is that when we are at Outdoor School, we are not looked at with mistrust. We are not asked to leave our backpacks at the door because we are stereotyped as those who steal. We are treated as people, equally respectable, equally intelligent, with thoughts and opinions that are worth being heard.

At the end of each week of ODS, the student leaders pass around a candle and share thoughts (and usually tears). On these nights, I have heard many stories of almost quitting school, but staying so they could still do ODS, stories of getting into hard drugs and bad situations, but being inspired to recover and save their own life by their experiences at ODS, stories of ODS helping someone with depression. This community of support transfers to the outside world as well.

The ODS program is ideally a week long, which provides enough time to elicit the changes in people we see, as well as enough time for adequately portioned field studies. However, due to budget cuts, Outdoor School is now only 3 days for sixth graders. Why does the cut matter? We can’t create as powerful an experience in 3 days, we can’t teach all the things we teach in a week in 3 days. Students often begin to open up on day 3, which is when the magic can start. I ran into a sixth grader who had just been at a 3 day program of ODS, (proudly wearing her wood cookie, the medallion of ODS) and as her mother told me, “it’s just not the same”.

In May, PPS held a board meeting to decide the future of ODS, and dozens of campfire song-singing, wood cookie-wearing student leaders attended to show support. In the language of Outdoor School, a message was passed, and slowly all student leaders joined hands, right over left, in a friendship circle, showing the PPS board the connection that ODS can create between complete strangers.

Despite the communities actions to save ODS before the vote was completed, the board voted to support just a 3 day program. Student leaders used their disappointment in this decision as fuel for a grassroots campaign, spreading awareness, raising over 50,000 dollars, and showing Oregon's political and business leaders, teachers, parents, and community members that ODS is important and worth fighting for.

Complications soon began to arise regarding the actions of the PPS board. First, we must examine how a week of ODS has been funded in the past (and how it was expected to be funded this year). One day is paid for by Friends of Outdoor School, one day by Portland Metro, one day by parents, and 3 days by the school district. So, 3 days worth of PPS funding for ODS would mean that we could have a 6 day week as is traditional. However, Portland Public Schools has not fulfilled it's agreement to pay for their 3 days, leaving the program cut in half. Many constituents I have spoken to would like to know where the promised money has gone, and why PPS did not follow through on a decision that they made themselves. School districts such as Corbett have been able to pay for a full week for their students, with help from, but not full dependence on, other organizations (such as Friends of Outdoor School).

Outdoor school affects those from all walks of life, and has the ability to connect any one person to the next. As student leader Maren "Aloe Vera" Corbly says, "Outdoor School kept me with a productive group of teenagers looking to make positive change in our student's lives, and make a global impact on environmental education. It allowed me to act as a learner, a team, a teacher, and a leader above all else. Outdoor School gave me a passion and a direction for my future".

For those involved, Outdoor School is a home. As student leaders leave from a week of Outdoor School, we are told that by taking the ideals we hold at Outdoor School into the outside community, we can change the world. It is my hope that this program will always be in place so that these ideals will continue to be taught in this empowering form. Similarly, when sixth graders take part in a tree planting ceremony at the end of the week, staff tell them that Outdoor School is a safe place which will always exist for them. Let's keep it that way.