

May 25, 2008

Frost Valley trip a highlight for sixth-graders

Catskills camp trip is a U-E tradition

*By George Basler
Press & Sun-Bulletin*

ENDICOTT -- Before leaving sixth grade, Landon Husted looks forward to his chance to experience the mischief of the "Catskill witch" and the "green hand."

The two mythic figures will play tricks on Landon and his fellow sixth-graders during the school trip to the Frost Valley YMCA. Nobody reveals who plays the two characters, but the tricks have become a part of the annual excursion by all sixth-graders in the Union-Endicott Central School District to the 6,000-acre camp and nature center in the Catskills.

The trip is an educational opportunity, rite of passage and lasting memory for the sixth-graders, school officials said.

A few other local schools send students as well. Seventh-graders from St. James Middle School and St. John the Evangelist also go to Frost Valley.

But U-E's excursion, now in its 36th year, is the oldest and largest. At a time when other programs of this type have fallen victim to tight budgets and the pressures of state testing, the U-E trip has survived to become an entrenched part of the district's curriculum.

"It's embedded in our culture. Parents who are now chaperones went as sixth-graders. It's just an institution," said Tim Lowie, principal at Ann G. McGuinness Intermediate School.

This year's trip from June 1 to June 5 will be different. For the first time, the 300 sixth-graders from McGuinness and Jennie F. Snapp Middle School will go together. The two schools have gone separately in the past. The combined trip is part of the district's effort to blend the two schools before all sixth-graders move to Snapp after the building is renovated.

Major effort

U-E's excursion is a large undertaking. A committee began planning it more than a year ago. Besides the 300 students, 90 parent chaperones, 19 teachers, three administrators, three nurses, one coordinator, one counselor and five community volunteers will make the trek.

They'll travel to Frost Valley in 15 school buses, accompanied by four luggage trucks. Money to support the trip comes from the Broome-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services and about \$33,000 the students and families raise themselves.

The trip was originally started by Paul Sheredy, now retired from the McGuinness school, and district Principal Chet Symancyk.

But the excursion wouldn't have survived for more than three decades without the commitment of parents, teachers and school board members, Lowie said.

Frost Valley hosts about 15,000 students each year, said Karen Rauter, communications director for the camp. Few schools have come for as many years as U-E, she said. "They seem to have incredible pride for this trip. They really value what they do here," she added.

The trip is part educational and part team-building. Students will study pond ecology, hike on nature trails, hear lectures on birds and snakes, put out a daily newspaper, write in journals and learn about geology. They'll also undertake a variety of physical challenges, including walking across a cable bridge over rushing water.

"When the kids get down there, something magical happens," said Lynda DeLuca, a veteran sixth-grade teacher and trip organizer. "When you see them cross the cable bridge, you see their eyes light up. It's something they'll never forget."

Outdoor classroom

During the 36 years, the district has taken medically fragile and even terminally ill students, sixth-grade teacher Lynne Eckert said. One of the most emotional excursions involved a girl with a brain tumor who died four months after the trip. The girl was too ill to walk over the cable bridge, so her mother did it for her. Later, the mother said the girl's laughter was something she'd never forget.

Teachers also tie the trip to their instruction during the year. For example, English and science teachers do combined projects using animals of the Catskill Mountains as a theme. Sixth-graders also read and write about "My Side of the Mountain," a novel about a 12-year-old boy surviving by himself in the Catskills.

This year, student teacher Larry Silba had students make animal traps, much as the main character did in the novel. Students had to use critical-thinking and problem-solving skills in making the traps.

The days at Frost Valley are structured like a school day, except that nature becomes the classroom, Eckert said.

Landon and some of his fellow students couldn't hide their excitement. "Everybody says it's really fun," said Dylan Konecny, 11.

"I can't wait for the bugs," said Austin Hettinger, 11, as he talked about pond ecology.

Students remember the trip, said Joseph Gallo, a community volunteer who has gone on the trip ever since his children were in school more than two decades ago.

"I can't walk around town without a half-dozen people recognizing me," Gallo said. The students remember getting their feet wet in pond ecology and the camaraderie. "Some knowledge rubs off along the way."