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**EVENTS
CALENDAR**

Page 35

Choosing the Right Kayak



Philadelphia Outward Bound

By Brenda Lange

Learning to survive in the wilderness doesn't have to happen in the middle of nowhere. Although Center City, Philadelphia isn't where you might expect to find groups of teens hiking around toting heavy backpacks, Outward Bound's Urban Expedition courses are thriving here, allowing groups of students to learn about themselves while working together to "survive."

Established in 1992, the Philadelphia Urban Center turns the city into the classroom, using outdoor activities to teach leadership skills, self-discipline and the value of compassion and service. Area public, private and parochial schools can enroll small groups of students in a variety of expedition and adventure programs during the academic year. Endorsed by the School District of Philadelphia as an extension of its physical education curriculum, the programs challenge students in ways that build character while cultivating a sense of social and environmental responsibility. To date, thousands of youth have participated—2300 students and teachers in 2006 alone!

During a 5- or 7-day Peer Leadership Expedition, students use the city to learn through experiences in museums, on public transportation and in neighborhoods. Then they get physical, completing a ropes course, rock climbing and camping out overnight in Valley Forge Park after canoeing down the Schuylkill River. I spent an afternoon with a group of students from Simon Gratz High School in North Philadelphia as they returned from a weeklong trip.

Despite spending a wet week outdoors without access to iPods or deodorant, the students were all smiles. For some, the expedition had been filled with "firsts." The first time sleeping outdoors. The first time following a vegetarian diet. The first time climbing rocks. The first time dropping their guard in the presence of peers, and facing themselves head on.

"We learned to work as a team and give each other encouragement," says 17-year-old Shakeena. Describing herself as "spoiled" because she gets anything she wants at home, Shakeena is typical of many of the city-dwelling kids who experience Outward Bound in the partly urban setting of Philadelphia.

At one point on the expedition, she slipped while climbing a pole at the ropes course. "I just wanted to get out of there, but everyone was yelling to me to keep going and that I could do it." And she did.

Out on the course, she explains, "I had to cope when things weren't going my way. I came in with an attitude, but worked hard to overcome that mental roadblock."

Shakeena's friend, 16-year-old Taquan, faced an obstacle that nearly ended the course for her. Taquan describes herself as a leader, especially when it comes to a big job that has to be done. In fact, on her application, it was her

leadership skills that she highlighted as a "strength she was bringing to the class." However, on one night of the expedition, she needed to rely on the strengths of her coursemates and instructors.

Taquan faced a panic attack while climbing a cargo net up to a giant treehouse where the group was to spend one night. Towering 35 feet above the forest floor and dwarfing some of the nearby trees, the structure can be intimidating, especially in fading light.

"I was just a few feet from the top," Taquan begins, "and I froze. I couldn't make it. I couldn't move. I panicked." After nearly an hour of patient encouragement from instructors and fellow students, Taquan was brought back to the ground where she was comforted by her teacher and friends. She ended up going home that night, but to her credit, she returned to the group the next day—shaken, but prepared to resume her journey.

"We learn through challenge," explains Dan Hoffman, Associate Program Director and Course Director for Philadelphia Outward Bound. "On the course, the unexpected does happen, but the instructors are well-prepared trained to handle anything. In the end, everything we do is designed to set up positive educational experiences for the students."

Another student named Brandon faced several new experiences during



the week outdoors. Gregarious and confident, he describes his outgoing and unafraid nature as his biggest strength. This friendly fearlessness was tested when it was his responsibility to find breakfast for a group of 11 with only \$25 in hand. "It was a challenge going out and talking to strangers and trying to get them to help you out," he says. "I worked a deal with a man from Pakistan at a stand in Reading Terminal Market. I was respectful and explained to him who we were and what we were doing, and he gave us 11 sandwiches and drinks for \$25."

Approaching a stranger for help was only one of the challenges Brandon faced successfully during the week. It was his first time in a canoe and his first time sleeping in a tent, which the group did one night near Valley Forge Park. And it was his first time attempting a ropes course, which he conquered. "It was hard," he says, "but it felt so great after I did it. I'm not afraid any more! I learned to respect others and trust them—the instructors and teammates."

One of the teachers who accompanied the group, Jan, describes the effect the program has had on her students over the years. "Something clicks in, and the ethics learned here become incorporated into their everyday existence."

This shift in perspective is precisely the goal of the program. During closing circle, the instructor's parting words to the group reflect the essence of Outward Bound. "The real experience begins after the course ends. Take this week, and apply it to your home life." ▲

In addition to Philadelphia, Outward Bound Urban Centers are currently located in Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, and New York City. To learn more, visit www.outwardboundcompass.org.

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