

ROTARY CLUB NEWS: LPHS initiates wilderness education program

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Lake Placid High School students Caleb Cooper, left, and Christian Meddaugh sit around the morning fire with the WOODS dog, Goose. (Provided photo — Carolyn Walton)

Lake Placid High School students recently walked into the forest for four days. In the winter.

The Wilderness Opportunity to Offer and Develop Skills (WOODS) program, alongside the school district and Paul Smith’s College, are working together to break down the barriers of entry that exist for wilderness exploration.

“The students of Lake Placid are surrounded by an untapped resource for education,” high school Principal Theresa Lindsay said. “Our partnership with WOODS allows students to take advantage of what the Adirondacks has to offer and to disconnect to connect. Students are presented with a unique opportunity to connect to others, connect to self, and connect to nature in a very meaningful way.”

The first trip occurred from Jan. 21 to 24. Students left with the knowledge of how to set up a tent, collect and process wood for fires in the winter, cook over open flames, tie a variety of knots, identify a few trees and connect with one another without the use of cellphones.

“This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” said one member of the group.

It is not easy living. WOODS is a challenge. Three days later, this student left the wilderness with a smile, feeling empowered and spoke in gratitude for all the “little” things taken for granted every day — running hot water, heated homes, technology and beds.

Another student cooked for the first time. The meditations, activities and games create a sense of belonging that is often missed in our fast-paced day-to-day lives in the front country. The bond between the students and staff members created during this challenge is an important aspect of WOODS. To learn alongside each other and complete the necessities of living outside create long-lasting memories and an invaluable sense of accomplishment.

WOODS is built on four core values: basic needs, self-reflection, belonging and rejuvenation. When a person walks into a forest, the brain and body change within five minutes. The heart rate slows, facial muscles relax, the frontal lobes of the brain quiet down, boosting creativity later in the day. This is according to data portrayed by Florence Williams, author of “The Nature Fix” (2018).

Thanks to the support of administrators, teachers and parents, students from grades 9 through 12 have the opportunity to enter the Adirondack wilderness and develop the skills necessary to thrive in it.

WOODS is in partnership with Paul Smith’s College, operating on a remote 622 acres with designated campsites and heated cabins for inclement weather, and National Outdoor Leadership School Northeast (NOLS), for outdoor gear and clothing.

The inclusion and equity through this wilderness educational experience has a hope of creating and adding a different pulse to this community. We live in the forest, and the youth growing up here now have the opportunity to learn through public school how to live outside among it.

The Rotary Club of Lake Placid is pleased to share this story written by a longtime friend of Rotary whose work we want to support and help grow.

The Rotary Club meets most Thursday mornings at 7:20 at the Marriott. Contact rotarylakeplacid@gmail.com.

(Carolyn Walton is the owner/founder of the ADK WOODS program.)