

Camp Explore Captivates Young Students

By TOM YANCEY
Staff Writer

Camp Explore, now in its third year of operation at the Clyde Austin 4-H Center south of Greeneville, causes both teachers and students to smile.

Teachers like Camp Explore because its offerings correspond well to the state of Tennessee's K-8 science curriculum, providing hands-on, age-appropriate, experiential sessions that expand what is being taught in the classroom, said Jerry Rhinehardt, the camp's director.

Students like Camp Explore because it's so much fun, and because it enables them to do things that most of them have never done before, he said — such as canoeing, or firing a muzzle-loading rifle, or shooting a bow and arrow, or holding different kinds of fossilized animal jaws in their hands and learning how to tell what the animals liked to eat.

Or actually preparing and eating chicken and dumplings over an open fire, the way the pioneers did, doing so under close supervision.

Or, making real hemp rope, or playing with toys like those that pioneer children had, or testing their courage and balance on a low ropes course, or learning survival skills.

Does any of that sound like fun? The kids seem to think so, too.

Sixth-grade students from Greeneville Middle School, who attended the camp Thursday and Friday — including an overnight stay — got to do all those things.

They also got to see a police drug-sniffing dog practice his skills, learn about science from real scientists, and make things from leather and other craft materials.

They learned just how smart a border collie has to be to herd sheep, cows, or even ducks, all from voice commands, and got to see how a Harris hawk can be trained to hunt.

Camp Explore's Mission

Camp Explore says it "is committed to enhancing student awareness, knowledge, and appreciation of our natural environment by teaching and modeling good character



Children from Mrs. Marty Masker's class at Greeneville Middle School ask for second helpings of chicken and dumplings cooked over an open fire by Marcella Spence, of Lewisburg, Tenn., as part of Camp Explore, at the Clyde Austin 4-H Camp.

traits while exploring our natural world in a way that fosters stewardship to preserve the Earth for future generations."

So far, between 3,000 and 3,500 students from kindergarten through eighth grade have been through the program, said Rhinehardt.

"In this day and age, to be able to take a field trip, it has to fit" into the curriculum and advance a specific educational aim, Rhinehardt said, or else the expense and time away from the classroom cannot be justified by the school system.

Camp Explore is sort of "like an extended classroom," he said. But by making the activities for the children as much fun as possible, "We hope they don't realize they're actually being taught."

The camp serves 24 counties in northeast Tennessee, and is heavily used by Greeneville and Greene County students, Rhinehardt said.

So far, every school that has tried Camp Explore has asked to return, he said.

In addition, many of the children who got a taste of Camp Explore have returned on their own to the summer session.

In 2004, the camp's summer session will be July 5 to 9, for students who have completed the fourth through sixth grades.

"One of the best compliments we ever received," he said, was when a group from Glenwood Elementary School told counselors that Camp Explore was "better than Dollywood."

Praise For Camp, Director
Rhinehardt had nothing but praise for the staff of the 4-H camp and its director, Andy Seals. Rhinehardt said that Seals operates the camp so conscientiously that he doesn't have to worry about anything but his own part of it.

Marcella Spence and her husband, B.D. Spence, have traveled to the camp to serve as counselors from their home in Lewisburg, near Nashville, for the past three years.

The Spences, both retired naturalists, started the environmental program at William P. Wrigley Camp at South Pittsburg. They have been 4-H volunteers for 35 years, and they volunteer at the annual 4-H Wildlife Conference, held here and in Milan, in West Tennessee.

After meeting Rhinehardt through the conference, she said, they decided to get involved in Camp Explore, because they liked its philosophy and because it was so much fun.

On Thursday, in addition to letting the students drop in dough for dumplings in their chicken stew (five iron kettles full, one per class), she showed them how to cook yeast bread in the kettle, and make corn cakes on a griddle over the same fire.

Youngsters lined up for second helpings until the

kettle was dry.

At another station, B.D. Spence showed children the edible "maypop" fruit of Tennessee's state wildflower, the passion flower.

He also showed them how to crank a simple but ingenious winding device he made himself to turn sisal baler twine into stout rope.

Rhinehardt described B.D. Spence as "a kid magnet," and that certainly seemed to be true, watching children pay rapt attention as he showed them the effect that changes in pressure have on seeds in a bottle of water.

Mr. Spence also showed the students a little about their own heritage by explaining, and showing them how pioneer children derived hours of fun from simple toys that had been handmade for them by a father, uncle, or grandfather.

Rhinehardt recalls over-hearing two boys coming out of Spence's "classroom" as one boy said to the other, "I wish I had a grandpa like that."

Next door to Spence, J.R. Arnold had a geologic "timeline" taped to the floor, in front of display cases containing real fossils from the Cambrian period (said to be 570 million years ago) to the much more recent Holocene period, about 11,000 years ago.

After a session in which Arnold explained fossils and time periods, the children are encouraged to dig into a big box of small fossils, and try to



Sun Photo by Tom Yancey
Sixth-grade students at Greeneville Middle School try the canoes on the pond at the Clyde Austin 4-H Camp, as part of Camp Explore.

match the fossils from the box with the proper time period, Rhinehardt said.

Arnold's enthusiasm for fossils is so contagious, teachers said, that the students also share it.

"It's wonderful," said Marty Masker, a sixth-grade teacher at GMS.

Near the end of the day on Thursday, she said, "There's not anything they did that the kids didn't enjoy — which

is hard to do for a sixth-grader."

Masker said the variety of offerings fit "almost every subject" she teaches — not only science, but also mathematics and social studies.

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Sun Photo by Tom Yancey
Jacob Waddle, a sixth-grade student in Mrs. Ann Botta's class at Greeneville Middle School, fires a real muzzle-loading rifle under the watchful eye of Marvin Reeves, a Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency officer, at Camp Explore.

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