

## White Pine Programs connect kids to nature

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YORK, Maine — Brendan Cain is 16, a home-schooled youth from York. Since he was 7, he has been coming to White Pine Programs, a nonprofit organization that offers outdoor nature immersion classes in the woods near Mount Agamenticus. He admits that as a kid he was “probably on a bad route in school” and that White Pine has turned his young life around.

He is today completely comfortable in a wilderness setting – able to recognize edibles, build a shelter, navigate with a compass, start a fire from found objects and listen to birds and wildlife to learn from what they are saying.

“It all intrigues me. Nature is my passion,” he said. And now he volunteers 15 to 20 hours a week of his time to teach younger children what he has learned.

“Brendan is a solid young man who can take care of himself,” said White Pine program manager Amy Beal. “He knows how to pay attention, he is grounded, he has confidence. Nature provides all this in a way that nothing else does.”

Beal and White Pine co-founder Dan Gardoqui said there are a lot of future Brendans in the Seacoast, and a few adults as well, drawn to the simple idea that nature is a profound teacher. It is a message too often drowned out in this technological age, to our collective loss, Gardoqui said.

“There’s not a lot of nature connection for people,” he said. “They are not spending enough time outdoors, and there’s plenty of evidence to document problems with that, including anxiety disorders, obesity, dexterity issues, screen addiction and substance abuse. Unfortunately, we’re more plugged into technology. But the fact is, nature is essential in human DNA. For the vast majority of human existence, we were part of nature.”

White Pine, he said, returns children to that natural environment – even if it means for a set time period each week.

“Parents these days are into structured time for their kids,” Gardoqui said. “They have to be here at a certain time, they have to be there. Ironically, many of our parents are saying, ‘OK, I can structure the time so I know my kids will be outdoors for two or three hours a week.’ We foster that connection with nature.”

Founded 17 years ago, White Pine today provides year-round programming for hundreds children from age 4 to 17 hailing from northern Massachusetts to Portland, Maine. Adult programs include wilderness training and wildlife tracking for organizations and governmental agencies, including the New Hampshire Fish and Wildlife Department and the U.S. Navy’s SERE School (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) in Rangeley, Maine.

During the school year, White Pine offers nature immersion classes for kindergartners, as well as a popular Ways of the Wild program for home-schooled and traditionally schooled students age 7 to 14. There are also after-school programs offered in York and South Berwick, and ones about to open in the fall in Kittery and, hopefully, at the Dondero Elementary School in Portsmouth. During the summer, more than 400 children attend one-week camp programs.

The classes and the camp mostly take place at Dan and wife Kate Gardoqui’s 16-acre property on Mountain Road in York, with additional programs on York’s Mount Agamenticus property as well as land on the mountain owned by three private landowners – Beal included, who owns 50 acres on Old Mountain Road.

One recent morning, youngsters from the Ways of the Wild program took a break to talk about their experiences. Each wore a necklace around his or her neck, with beads signifying wilderness tasks they’ve accomplished. One is a navigation challenge – find your way out of the woods using only a compass (staff are discretely watching from a distance). There are bird and tree identification challenges, too.

And then there’s the “sitspot challenge” – so named because you sit in one spot for at least 15 minutes in silence and write about what you hear and see.

“If you sit long enough, the animals who were scared away come back. I’ve seen a bunny and a raccoon during sitspot,” said Bianca Lima, a home-schooler from Saugus, Massachusetts.

Amelia Murphy is a third-grader at Little Harbor Elementary School in Portsmouth. Once a week, she spends her day at White Pine instead of in her traditional classroom.

“I’ve always liked the outdoors and helping people understand the outdoors,” she said. “I like the challenges we do. Sometimes we make something and sometimes it collapses, but it’s fun to try again,” she said.

Amelia is not alone. While many of the children in Ways of the Wild are home-schooled, some come from brick and mortar schools in, among other places, York and South Berwick, and Portsmouth, Rollinsford and Hampton, New Hampshire. Gardoqui said parents typically drive this process.

“We’ll help facilitate the discussion but usually parents are doing this on their own,” he said. “And parents of current kids will offer support to new parents. And the schools have been quite reasonable. Every teacher, every parent, every kid, every school is different.”

One longtime collaboration is with Coastal Ridge Elementary School in York.

“CRES has a longstanding, wonderful working relationship with White Pine,” said Principal Sean Murphy. “Our curricula have commonalities so we work closely to educate York students in a partnership both up at the White Pine setting and on school grounds.

“White Pine is fabulous, and I have personally supported them and have sent my children to their camps.”

Gardoqui said a key part of White Pine is its commitment to provide its programs to children from economically challenged homes. There is a robust scholarship fund that the staff is working to grow to encompass more kids. For instance, last summer and again this summer, the staff is working with York Community Service Association to provide 10 scholarships to families who would otherwise not consider the camp program.

“We’re always asking ourselves, how can we reach out further?” Gardoqui said.

Meanwhile out in the woods that recent day, it was clear the kids were in charge of their own experiences, with staff there to guide but not order. A youngster from the kindergarten program, for instance, was tending the fire built deep into the woods. While there was a volunteer close by, he was not there to hover or assist.

That’s on purpose, Beal said.

“We foster self-reliance,” he said. “When we were kids and you went outside, you had to make your own decisions. We have to create that now because it doesn’t exist naturally. But when kids ask us questions, we don’t give them answers. We ask more questions. That’s how they learn.”

Gardoqui said this open-ended learning, “meeting them in their own place,” produces wonderful results.

“We encourage them to dive deeper, to slow down and connect to what is happening around them,” he said. “When kids feel they’re being respected, they know that. Right now, for instance, we have a kid who’s crazy about ants. He knows every type of ant, right down to their Latin names. Another wants to make fairy houses all day, and that’s OK.

“They’re being told all the time what they can’t do. Here, when they ask, ‘Is it OK to play in the mud?’, we say, ‘Yes, you can.’ ‘Can I jump off that log?’ ‘Sure you can,’” he said. “We give seemingly unstructured time to explore. But the kids feel the flow.”

For more information on White Pine Programs, visit

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