

Muskoka memories

Leadership program celebrates 20 years of encouragement and faith



Derek Murphy went to Muskoka Woods as a Grade 8 student and five more times as a secondary school leader. The second-year university student said it was an incredible experience.

(Windsor, Ontario, Oct. 14, 2014) – You don't have to be the best. You just have to do your best.

For the past 20 years, that's been the mantra for tens of thousands of students who have made the trip north from Windsor for the "Muskoka Experience."

"It's all about support, encouragement and acceptance," said Greg Peck, a retired WECDSB physical education consultant who, despite leaving the profession eight years ago, still helps organize the annual trip. "It's not about competition. Everyone has an opportunity here, and no matter what their ability is, we celebrate whatever they can do."

Since 1994, about a thousand Grade 8 students a year from throughout the board have travelled to Muskoka Woods Sports Resort, a Christian, interdenominational, non-profit sports camp located on more than 1,000 wooded acres about 200 kilometers north of Toronto.

Under the guidance of secondary school leaders, the students take part in a wide variety of outdoor physical activities like zip lining, canoeing, mountain biking, capture the flag, high ropes, and folk dancing, all designed to foster confidence and personal growth in a challenging, but supportive and encouraging environment.

Second-year University of Windsor student Derek Murphy went to Muskoka when he was in Grade 8 at St. Pius elementary, and then participated for the as a leader on five separate trips while he was at St. Joseph's secondary.

"Being a leader at Muskoka Woods is one of the proudest things I've accomplished," he said. "I learned skills there that I'll have for the rest of my life. You learn about motivation, leadership and teamwork, communication and conflict resolution. You can take those things anywhere in life."

The program began when Peck and Director of Education Paul Picard – a vice-principal at the time – travelled to the resort with about 45 Grade 8 students from W.J. Langlois, where Picard was working then.

"We wanted to give the students an experience that would emphasize an active healthy lifestyle, but would also focus on the development of leadership and life skills," Peck said.

Word of the positive experience of those first students spread quickly, and in 1995, the program expanded to include three schools. In the next year, nine more schools sent students. Since its inception, an estimated 25,000 students have gone through the Muskoka Woods experience.

"Every kid should go and experience this," said Murphy, who is now doing a concurrent program at the university in education and psychology, with plans to become an elementary or high school teacher. "It really showcases the person and brings out a little more of their true character. It's what helped me decide that I want to be a teacher."

Murphy acknowledged that the physical component of the program is challenging.

"As soon as you get there it starts," he said. "There are activities throughout the day and the only time you stop is to eat and sleep. By the time it's over, you're spent."

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Former Muskoka
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However, he was quick to point out that the camp's atmosphere is one of positive encouragement where every student can try a new activity in a safe, caring environment and have some level of success.

"It was especially motivating to see some of the special education kids who go up," he said. "Everybody's cheering them on as they go through a zip line or scale a rope. No matter who you are, you accomplish something there."

Peck noted that faith is a critical component of the program's foundation, which complements the board's mission to provide students with a quality Catholic education rooted in Gospel teachings, enabling all to grow to their full potential.

"There's a solid spiritual dimension to this," he said. "We pray a lot, we give thanks a lot, and we walk the talk in terms of treating people with dignity and respect."

An essential part of creating that spiritual dimension, Peck added, comes from making it "totally unplugged" for the Grade 8 students.

"That means no electronic devices," he said. "We want them listening to the loons on the lake, not the tunes on their headphones."

Having been through it a number of times and being able to reflect back on it, Murphy now realizes that the program's ultimate goal is to create a better world by providing life-changing experiences for the students.

"There are certain kids that just get it," he said. "They take what they learn and go back to their school and make it a better place."