

# MAKING THE SKY THE LIMIT

BY JANET STEINERT



“You can do it, Diva!”

“Come on, Bullet, you’re almost there!”

Students yell encouragement from the rocks along the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. They are working together to reach a challenging goal. Last summer, the assistant principal and several teachers from the Whitefield School in Whitefield, New Hampshire, attended the Trail to Every Classroom (TTEC) training, offered through the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the National Park Service and a variety of partners. They traveled to the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, where teachers from the eastern seaboard joined to learn about incorporating state standards into lessons along the Appalachian Trail. They brought back a wealth of knowledge and eagerly began the development of an outdoor club with the intent of introducing students to the wilderness in their back yards.

Whitefield School assistant principal Janet Steinert spearheaded the efforts of the club organizers with the support of teachers Melissa Jellison, Melanie Brown, and Donna McCusker. In the fall, a few meetings were held, and students participated in two hikes—Lonesome Lake and Mt. Willard. Each hike was less than four miles; yet, the students took the entire day to complete the distance. However, interest was high, and 33 students joined the club.



The students in the aptly named Wilderness Explorers began the year by setting goals and stating hopes and dreams, an exercise that is done school-wide at the Whitefield School. Their goal was to climb Mt. Washington and to stay at Lakes of the Clouds hut

overnight. At the time, the goal seemed lofty, but the advisors took the challenge. A calendar was then designed that prepared the students to meet their goal. They began with a smaller goal of earning the shirts that were provided through a grant offered to TTEC participants. In order to earn their shirt, students were required to attend five meetings and two hikes. At each meeting, students were taught principles of the wilderness; and before each hike, students were asked to recite those princi-

LEFT: Lakes of the Clouds by Erin Donovan; ABOVE: Whitefield teachers explain map use on Mt. Monroe.



Whitefield students reflect and rest at Lakes of the Cloud as the sun sinks below the horizon.

came streaming in. Mrs. Steinert wrote additional successful grant proposals that paid for a large group summit, hut stay, and shuttle ride down; the district technology coordinator offered the use of “flip” cameras—small video cameras—to film the hike and activities; AMC offered to provide guides and gear for the hike; and Great Glen Trails significantly lowered the cost of the shuttle down Mt. Washington.

As plans for the hike became cemented, parents secretly wrote their children letters of encouragement to be delivered in the evening at the hut. Arrangements were made with the school

media specialist to set up computers to be on-line with the Mt. Washington Observatory when the hikers would stand in front of the observatory camera.

THE BIG DAY FINALLY ARRIVED, and students and chaperones rode to the Highland Center to meet their guides. After team building activities and a gear check, AMC trip leaders Jared Bowers and Anne Weisheipl divided the 19 students and six adults into two groups and shuttled them to the trailhead. Because of the difficulty of the Trail in that area, the leaders stopped at strategic points to indicate characteristics of the wilderness and to conduct learning activities. Although the students struggled over the rocks with their heavy packs, each one remained determined and focused. They finally completed the hike at their first stop, Lakes of the Clouds Hut, after five hours of clambering over rocks. Then, in spite of the difficulty of the climb, several of the students joined Whitefield School staff for a pre-dinner climb up nearby Mt. Monroe. The 5,000+ foot mountain provided spectacular views in the cloudless evening.

After dinner, students learned about acid rain and the effects on the fragile alpine environment. As the sun sank below the horizon, streaks of pink, orange, and red painted the blue sky while the full moon rose over the group. As a frigid breeze swept across the mountaintop, the Wilderness Explorers headed back to the hut where students and staff gathered at tables for final instructions before retiring for the evening. They reflected on the highlights of the day’s hike, and thanked each other for support. As the AMC “croo” played a trio of banjo, fiddle, and guitar music, Steinert passed out the letters that the parents had written; and as the music wafted through the lodge, the students read their letters.

On the first hike, students learned through experience. One girl brought a purse filled with snacks. Several boys toted heavy water jugs but had no backpack. They stopped along the Trail frequently and were exhausted at the end. We leaders learned much through this experience also, including: make sure that all students have a backpack and two full bottles of water, and teach students to walk slowly and steadily in order to most effectively hike.

As winter approached, the club advisors were contacted by an education coordinator from the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) who offered a snowshoeing program out of the Highland Center for the students in the Wilderness Explorers. The AMC provided all gear, taught the students about cold weather snowshoe hiking, and took them on magnificent hikes in the area. At the end of each hike, the students would regroup in a classroom where they would sip hot chocolate and learn about winter habitats, animal identification through skins, skeletons and scat, and other subjects.

In the spring, the push toward Mt. Washington really began. Partial funding was obtained through a grant from the North Country Health Consortium. The students planned an anti-tobacco campaign that they presented to the school community. In their project, they set out to prove that climbing mountains could only be done through healthy living. A student-designed banner was signed by the school community as part of a pledge to live healthy lives and to remain tobacco free, and the Wilderness Explorers explained that they would carry the banner up to Mt. Washington as a symbolic gesture.

Nineteen students took the challenge to prepare for the Mt. Washington hike while the remainder of the club chose to participate in the design of a PowerPoint presentation to document it. As word of the students’ goal spread, support



A banner was carried up to Mt. Washington as a symbolic gesture for healthy living.

When the bus finally rolled into Whitefield School with the tired hikers, the school community stood in the sunshine and greeted them with applause.

The next day, students finished up their breakfast and were out on the Trail in the early morning sunshine. The hike was daunting to the young hikers as they crawled over more rocks and up steep embankments, but they completed the 1.5 mile climb in less than two hours and reached the summit in time to unfurl their banner and snap pictures.

BACK AT THE WHITEFIELD SCHOOL, the staff and student body were able to observe the hikers through the Mt. Washington Web site as their classmates stood on the observation deck being filmed by the observatory’s camera. After a celebratory snack of Oreos, shuttles transported the group to the Pinkham Notch Visitor Center where they were greeted and congratulated by AMC staff. After a hearty picnic lunch, the group bade farewell to AMC staff, thanking them for their leadership and support. As they boarded the school bus, they looked up at the top of Mt. Washington with a sense of pride and accomplishment; they had set a difficult goal, and mastered it. When the bus finally rolled into Whitefield School with the tired hikers, the

school community stood in the sunshine and greeted them with applause. The Wilderness Explorers had demonstrated that dreams really do come true at Whitefield School.

The Wilderness Explorers has made a significant impact on the lives of the children who participated in the club this year and advisors have discussed further incorporation of lessons from the Trail into their teaching routine, seeking out service learning opportunities in the local community, and plans to repair and maintain the school community trail. They will also continue to offer the outdoor club so that more students will be provided with an understanding of the importance of healthy living, an appreciation for the wilderness in their own backyard, empowerment through the fulfillment of challenging goals, connections to others, and the confidence to accomplish whatever they set their minds to. And that’s what matters most.

For more information visit:

[www.appalachiantrail.org/TTEC](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/TTEC)