

Happy 50th Anniversary Wilderness School - "Transformation happens here"



"This is our hidden gem," stated Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes during the weekend long ceremony celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness School!

Founded in 1974, the program model is rooted in positive youth development. The base camp is a beautiful property in East Hartland surrounded by trees, trails and the calm of the outdoors.

"The Wilderness School has become a place of solace and healing, and I could not be more proud to have this as part of our toolbox in the children's behavioral health continuum," the Commissioner further stated.

Youth come to the program from across Connecticut and include adolescents known to the Department but far more who reside in their own homes and wish to learn additional skills to make changes in their life. Studies have documented the Wilderness School's positive impact upon self-esteem, self-control, and interpersonal skill enhancement of those attending.

Most importantly, the youth learn about themselves and overcoming personal challenges.

Aaron Wiebe is the Director. "You cannot have a director that is more compassionate, more thoughtful, more calm," according to the Commissioner.

"The learning that takes place on the course can be a metaphor for other situations," stated Aaron. "Often we're working with young people who come from situations that are defeating." Through the outdoor experiences and relationships with staff, they feel "empowered."

Programs range from one-day to 20-day excursions as youth partake in backpacking, rock climbing, ropes challenge courses, canoeing, and other physical activities including team building exercises. The program course area follows the Appalachian Trail corridor of the Taconic and Berkshire Mountain ranges of Connecticut and Massachusetts.



Alex took part in a 5-day program at 13 years of age which he described as "fun and very challenging" despite really wanting to be out for 20 days. "I definitely learned that you are able to learn leadership in even like the smallest situations," he stated. "Patience" is also something he took away from his experiences which have now included participating in annual excursions including - a 20-day hike!

"Every experience is different of course," Andrys stated. "Being a city boy from Hartford, being outdoors is kinda like, it's very rare." He was exposed to an occasional fishing trip, but nothing like what the excursions had to offer. He offered insights on what it is like to be away from social media, the internet, cell phones and simply experience the outdoors. "You have no other choice but to be your raw self. And as hard as it is for you to get used to it, it allows you to look deep inside yourself and learn about who you are."

"The outdoors is the land of opportunity and I think the Wilderness School is a great foundation for that."

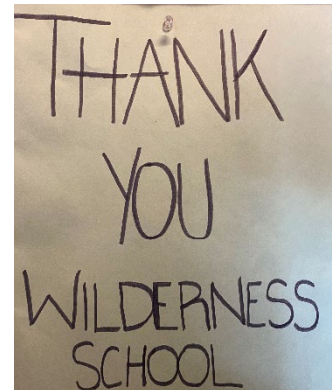


Nikita was exposed to the program back in 2019 and "loved it ever since." His initial 5-day hike was difficult. "I learned that I can do a lot more than I think I can," he stated. "A lot more." It was completing tasks that he was uncomfortable with that in the end, taught him the most about himself. For other youth he would tell them to "definitely try it out" and that "you're not going to know until you go." Maybe the most important message an adolescent wants to know - "They have a lot of good food."

Gabe Oliva is a Lead Expedition Instructor and has been with the school since 2019. He is now giving back to youth - which he has had similar experiences. At 17 years of age, Gabe made some "poor choices" and was placed into a 28-day program adventure. "After that, I dedicated my life to being an outdoor leader," he stated given that program changed his life. "I love coming to work here. I really do."

"I like this place, I like coming back here because I feel like it has all my skills in one place," stated Mira Siewert. "It's not every day you get to work with kids who have so much life and energy. It's superfun." The youth have overcome so much adversity and some youth "grow up" right on the course. Their changes motivate her to become a better person. "There is a lot of emotion behind this place," she added.

Aaron "speaks from the heart" when describing the Wilderness School, the staff and the youth who attend. While the program does outdoor activities, deep into the Northeastern trials, he explains his perspective on why the program is successful.



"What we do is important, but that's not necessarily I believe from where the magic comes from," he stated. "There's a place where the magic comes from, and it actually has to do with the words right behind me. It's this willingness to try, it's this willingness to step forward to do something different, to do something new and in doing so, you may confront new information," he stated. This is where you learn about yourself and your capabilities he explained.

Youth who attend the program may have had adverse childhoods and are facing huge obstacles in their future. "When they make that decision to try, something else can happen and all of a sudden those defeating stories start to get re-written," he stated.

"I believe our staff are above and beyond the most supportive staff you can possibly want."

The camp's logo is a butterfly - reflective of the changes that occur.

"It's more than camping," stated Commissioner Dorantes.

"Transformation happens here."