



Jordan Hoover of Community Day School in Squirrel Hill takes a break while hiking as part of the American Wilderness Leadership School last summer in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

Wilderness School Offers Teachers, Students Unique Opportunity

Education - Jordan Hoover can't believe it, really.

He's experienced something wonderful and is mystified by the thought that more people don't know about it. How, he wonders, can something so good be so hidden in plain sight?

It's the American Wilderness Leadership School, or AWLS, run by Safari Club International Foundation. Located in Jackson Hole, Wyo., the school each summer offers six eight-day programs aimed at educators and one seven-day program aimed at students ages 16-18.

They aren't meant to turn attendees into hunters, said Todd Roggenkamp, deputy director of education for the Foundation, though all get to shoot rifles, handguns and bows, sometimes for their first time.

Rather, he said, the goal is to educate teachers and students about the hows and whys of conservation and to prepare them to return home and share that message with students, classmates, colleagues and friends.

Many do. Follow-up surveys of attendees show that more than 60 percent of teachers go home to build outdoors-related curriculum into their classes, Roggenkamp said.

Hoover soon will be one of them. Director of communications and technology at Community Day School in Squirrel Hill, he attended AWLS last summer. He's working now to put together an "archery in the schools" program together there.

He probably wouldn't have undertaken that without attending AWLS, he said.

"I kind of feel like it's a really well-kept secret, and it shouldn't be," Hoover said. "It was probably the single best professional development program I've ever been to in 10 years in education. It was great."

The Leadership School got its start in 1977, initially targeting teens.

While youngsters are still a part of it, the primary emphasis now is educating teachers — from all disciplines and all platforms, including public schools, 4H programs, scouting groups, environmental education centers, and elsewhere — with the idea that they'll reach hundreds and thousands more. That expands the program's reach in a way it couldn't otherwise, Roggenkamp said.

Teachers get continuing education credits and, if they choose to pursue them, graduate school credits.

Attending is tough in one way, easy in another

“It's a very arduous eight days,” Roggenkamp said. “We've got everyone up at 7 or 7:30 in the morning and we keep them going until 8 or 8:30 every night. But everyone stays very engaged.”

Attendees spend time in class each day — though most of it is spent outdoors — studying stream ecology, game population management, outdoor ethics and the like. They also go on field trips, which includes time spent shooting, rafting, hiking and more. They even learn some basic wilderness survival skills to make them feel comfortable taking people outdoors back home, Roggenkamp said.

The easy part — though few realize it — is getting there.

Tuition is \$900. There are also travel expenses involved. Many teachers go for free, however, sponsored by local Safari Club International chapters.

That's how Hoover went. The Pittsburgh chapter of Safari Club covers tuition and up to \$700 in travel expenses for four or five participants each year, said Dennis Chiedor, chairman of its AWLS committee. It's sent teachers and students from all across the region, from Belle Vernon to Apollo to Derry to North Huntingdon, he said.

When it can find people to go, that is.

“Honestly, that's my hardest job, trying to get people to take our money. It's basically \$1,600 free,” Chiedor said. “But whenever I try to tell people about it, a lot think I'm trying to sell them something.”

The chapter commits to sponsoring attendees out of concern for the future of hunting in particular and outdoor recreational in general, President Patrick Hennon said.

“So many kids aren't being introduced to the outdoors and our sport of hunting like they once were. We need to do something now, or in 20 years there won't be anyone doing it,” he said.

The program may or may not change that, Roggenkamp said. But at a minimum, it shows attendees who hunters are and why it's important they exist.

Students study the “North American Model” of wildlife conservation, which stresses that wildlife belongs to all the people, he said. They also learn that it's only sportsmen who pay for wildlife's care and management, through license sales and taxes collected on sporting equipment.

“Wildlife conservation, this isn't a freebie. It's something sportsmen pay for. That's something a lot of people who come here are surprised by,” Roggenkamp said. “They have no idea the bill for conservation in this country is being paid with sportsmen's dollars.”

That knowledge often changes attitudes, he said. Even attendees who don't arrive or leave as hunters at least usually have a new respect for them.

The program's instructors — some of them college professors, others wildlife professionals — don't tell students what to think, though, Hoover said. They present information and let students make up their own minds, he said.

That's some of what makes the program so good, in his mind.

Now, he wants to spread the word. Attending AWLS has changed how he plans to work and what he plans to tell other educators.

“Even in the city, there's plenty of space. You don't have to go to Wyoming to use the outdoors as a classroom. There are lots of opportunities to do that right here,” Hoover said.

“Really, what I'd like to do, now that I've seen this and what it is, is push other teachers to try it.”

Wilderness calls

Information about the American Wilderness Leadership School can be found on its website, safariclubfoundation.org/education/awls.

Six teacher sessions are planned this year — two each in June, July and August — with one session for high school students from June 30-July 6. All participants stay at the Safari Club International Foundation's 33-acre Granite Ranch.

Would-be attendees have to fill out an application, available on the website. High school students also have to get three letters of recommendation and write an essay.

Anyone interested in pursuing a sponsorship from Safari Club's Pittsburgh Chapter should contact Dennis Chiedor at dchiedor@zoominternet.net or visit the club webpage at safariclubpittsburgh.org.

Applications are due to the Pittsburgh chapter no later than April 1, Chiedor said.

They're considered on a first-come, first-serve basis, though, so applying early is better than late, he said.

To date, the chapter has never turned anyone down because it's never had more applicants than sponsorships available, President Patrick Hennon said.

“I would love to have that problem,” he said. “We want as many people to go as possible.”



By [Bob Frye](#)

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