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Chelsea kids get to explore the great outdoors



Boys celebrate a trip last summer to the summit of N.H.'s Mount Cardigan

By Kathy Shiels Tully | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 28, 2013

Brianne Rafford-Varley grew up hiking and camping in the woods and mountains of New Hampshire. So when she got a chance to share that majesty with city kids from Chelsea, she jumped on it.

“When you are tossed into the woods with people you hardly know, it tests you mentally,” she said. “You learn so much about yourself.”

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After attending a five-day training program sponsored by the Appalachian Mountain Club, Rafford-Varley, 27, the social recreation director at the Jordan Boys and Girls Club in Chelsea, realized what climbing a mountain could do for a child who had never done it before.

Last year, membership grew from the initial eight to 25 kids, mostly boys. Now, more than 50 kids are clamoring to go on their next adventure in the great outdoors.

Rafford-Varley started small in the summer of 2011 by hand-picking eight boys, ages 8 to 11, for a one-day, 4-mile hike on the Ponkapoag Pond Trail in Canton, part of the 8,500-acre Blue Hills Reservation. Next came an overnight at Ponkapoag Camp.

Though just minutes from Boston, Ponkapoag felt like a world away for the boys. Only one in the group — with an uncle in Maine — had done anything similar.

But all of them wanted to do it again.

“They trusted me, and more importantly, trusted me to take them into the woods,” Rafford-Varley said.

Mac Shillingford, 11, Kelvin Gordils, 12, and Anthony Rubeira, 12, have become enthusiastic outdoorsmen.

“We get to know a lot more about each other,” said Rubeira, including who snores the most. The three boys say it’s a toss-up between the Aguilar brothers: Julian, 11, and Nectali, 12.

“I cook meatballs on a camping stove,” Shillingford said proudly. “We also do pizza, pasta, and garlic bread,” added Rubeira, who pointed out that eating outdoors in the woods isn’t always better because dirt sometimes blows into the food.

Pride in accomplishing an ambitious goal can be heard in the boys’ voices when they talk about their highest New Hampshire summits: 3,155-foot Mount Cardigan, in Orange, where the Chelsea crew met the challenge of four days in the wilderness; a 2.8-mile hike up to the 2,700-foot-high Zealand Falls Hut for an overnight in New Hampshire’s Zealand Notch; and a sleepover in another of the Appalachian Mountain Huts enabled the crew to climb two mountains — Firescrew and Cardigan — in one day, Rubiera said.

“When I closed my eyes, I could feel the breeze. I could feel the birds chirping,” said Shillingford about reaching the top of Mount Cardigan.

“They’re so carefree. They don’t have a lot of worries,” Rafford-Varley said. “They’re really in the moment.”

During one hike, she said, six boys, all 12 years old, spent two hours just throwing a branch up a waterfall and watching it come down.

Members of the hiking club meet regularly to talk about the outdoors, safety, materials needed, and preparation.

Now membership has spread between two clubs. A second club, formed solely for 8- to 9-year-olds, has attracted more girls, for about one-third of the 15 young members. The 10 and older club, with 35 kids, is still mostly boys.

All they need is enthusiasm and commitment. No experience, equipment, or fees are required. The Appalachian Mountain Club’s partnership with Northface, a manufacturer for outdoor gear and apparel, provides “everything you need to take a kid camping: tents, wool socks, hiking boots, rain gear, long underwear, cooking gear,



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

James Guillaume, 10, of Lynn, left, and Justin Gordils, 8, of Chelsea, both members of the hiking club at the Boys and Girls Club in Chelsea, packed their backpacks with gear during a pre-hike meeting.

and backpacks,” Rafford-Varley said. The gear is free to use, and just needs to be returned washed and cleaned.

“It’s the way we can accomplish programs like these, the hiking club, and provide more for our club members and their families,” said Josh Kraft, president and CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston, which includes 1,000 in the Chelsea club and has 15,000 participating children and teens overall, 40 percent of them from households with an annual income less than \$27,000.

The outdoor club, Kraft said, opens their eyes to another world out there, as he illustrated in one story.

The leaders “collect all cellphones, any technology, before the kids go on a hike,” Kraft said. “So at the top of one mountain [Cardigan], one of the teen boys, [Adriel Lopez, 16], pulls out his phone and Bri tells him, ‘Put that away!’

“ ‘But I just climbed a mountain,’ ” Kraft said Lopez exclaimed. “ ‘And I have to call my mom! I have to tell her how beautiful it is.’ ”

Among the adventures Rafford-Varley has planned for the spring is a four-day backpacking trip at the Mohican Outdoor Center in Blairstown, N.J., during April school vacation and a weeklong trip in May, based at the Highland Center in Bretton Woods, N.H.

The parents see the benefits for their kids as well, including Mswati Hanks , whose sons, Che, 9, and Isaiah, 13, are members of the group.

“The hiking club exposes these kids who are from an urban area to the outdoors, and not only do they get to exercise and gain an appreciation of the outdoors, but they also gain leadership skills, teamwork, and responsibility,” he said.

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DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

A pile of water bottles awaited distribution.

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