

Tall pines, not tall buildings

Arizona Outdoor Adventures brings inner-city youth to the White Mountains



All photos courtesy Arizona Outdoor Adventures

BY MISTY NEWMAN

SPECIAL TO WHITE MOUNTAIN OUTDOORS

Picture this — waking up to the smell of fresh mountain air, hearing nothing but the peaceful sounds of nature, and seeing a beautiful sunrise among the Ponderosa pine & Douglas fir trees.

This is the scene that kids wake up to in the camps provided by Arizona Outdoor Adventures (AOA), an organization that helps low-income and inner city youth experience the great outdoors. From a base camp in the White Mountains, the kids can enjoy fishing, horseback riding, hikes and other activities they may have few opportunities to experience. For the kids, the camps are free, all meals, licenses and equipment is provided.

For over 15 years, Dan Priest has been taking groups of kids camping in the majestic White Mountains of Arizona. Priest is a former guide and outfitted hunting and fishing trips in the State of Arizona for over 30 years.

The idea for AOA first took hold in his mind when he was on a trip to New Mexico.

Priest recalls, “I was on a trip with a guy going to western New Mexico to scout some areas for antelope. We talked about the kids that never get the opportunity to do things outdoors. We started talking about this way back in the 80’s and how something could get started to get kids outdoors. Especially with inner city kids, like in Phoenix and Tucson.”

The idea percolated for a few years before Priest realized he was the one who had to make it happen.

“Here I am again taking a trip out of the valley, and I’m going to the eastern part of the state to set up camp for a group of guys. This is when it really hit me. Something needs to be done. Even on a small scale— to create this opportunity for kids.” Priest said.

Finally, in 1996 everything came together when Priest filed the paperwork to create AOA as a non-profit.

Today, AOA hosts numerous camps across Arizona, but the summer months are spent at location in the White Mountains.

Working with organizations such as the Boys and Girls Clubs, United Methodist Outreach Ministries and Guthrie Mainstream Services, the camps bring small groups of 10-12 kids to the tall pines for a four-day camp.

Over the years, Priest has countless memories and stories of the kids that have participated in these camps.

Priest shares a story about one of the boys that attended an AOA camp several years ago.

“I’m in the cook tent early and a boy 11 years old, comes into the tent. I said to him, ‘Well you’re going to be going into 5th grade. You know 5th grade was one of my favorite years.’ He then tells me, ‘This is the first year I’ve looked forward to going back to school. I asked him why. He said, ‘This is the first time that kids will want to know what I did over the summer. I have so many things to tell them about the fish I caught, the elk and bighorn sheep I saw, and the nice times around the camp.’”

Priest recollects another time with a group of kids who were unusually patient.

“Most kids don’t have very much patience that are between 8-14 years of age. So we get to the lake and usually we are there all day to fish. If one of the kids don’t want to fish they can do another activity. One group of kids liked to fish so much they were all at the lake the entire day. They didn’t want to leave. This had been their first time fishing.”

Priest stated that when those kids returned to the valley, they formed a fishing club- and were planning trips to nearby urban lakes. He adds, “These kids now have something to do that is a lot of fun and that is healthy to do the rest of their lives because someone took them out in the outdoors and taught them some basics on how to fish.”

For another boy that had a passion for fishing, Priest arranged



Part of the joy of fishing is learning to reel in the catch.

a fishing trip with Flathead Ed; a well-known fishing guide and holds the state record on flathead catfish. Priest stated, "They went out all night. He loved to fish and he caught the bug at one of our camps."

Priest's desire to start AOA came from knowing how much kids benefit from being in the outdoors.

"There are a lot of reasons being outdoors is so important for kids ... kids need healthy activities and need to be active in a healthy way. It's cleansing for the body, soul and spirit and I think it's important that kids know adults care about them, that adults will invest in them.

The camps are funded by donors to AOA, which includes individuals, organizations like Arizona Elk Society and Safari Club International and other sportsmen's organizations, and businesses like Sportsmen's Warehouse and Cabela's, who help with discounted equipment.

"It's a lot of work to raise the money for these camps, but very satisfying to do, I wouldn't do it if I didn't care about the kids. You think about kids that grow up that don't have anyone that cares about them," Priest said.

With this number of kids going through the camp, Priest emphasizes the importance of having quality gear. The gear is rotated

and on a continuous basis and AOA purchases the equipment brand new.

"The equipment needs to withstand the weather. We want the kids to have a great outdoor experience so the equipment needs to work well. We recently had raised \$2,000 in a yard sale and the proceeds go back to AOA which is used to upgrade the equipment," Priest said.

To provide this opportunity to as many kids as possible, Priest urges others to begin a program similar to AOA.

"My final thought is that there has to be other guys like myself that can get something started like AOA and put these small groups of kids together that want to be in the outdoors and don't have the opportunity to do it. If you're out there and you really see the importance of it, get it going. People will always say it can't be done, but just do it."

For more information or to find out how you can get more involved, visit: <http://azoutdooradventures.org> or call: 602-448-6996.

Misty Newman is a mother of two and an avid outdoor enthusiast and a founding member of Arizona Adventures Cooperative. Through the partnership between AAC and Arizona Outdoor Adventures, Misty is also able to share her passion of the outdoors with youth.

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