

Get Wild: Little hawks: Reflections of an educator/naturalist

Staff



A family takes in the sights at in Pebble Creek.

Bill Betz/Get Wild

My “little hawks,” as I refer to my scientists, call me “the nature teacher,” but nature is actually the teacher. Nature teaches us all. It teaches us about life. It teaches us about violence, survival, beauty, beginnings and endings. It teaches that life isn’t fair and, eventually, that everything comes to an end and new life begins. As I hold out a warm duckling to the children, I treasure that moment, let it go and know that it is now an eternal memory. Nature, in all its splendor and violence, is all knowing, beautiful, frightening, and at the same time full of mystery. It is in all of us. It is in the tears we weep which have the same salt as the ocean. It is our breath that the trees gift us. We exhale to everything that is green.

The art of teaching begins with planting the seed of trust. It is sown from day one. Taking root, trust pushes down, spreads deep. Trust secures the building of rapport. It is essential.

The children call me the nature teacher, but the hats I wear are more of a guide, a gatherer of wonderings, thoughts and ponderings. I try not to answer their questions too quickly. I let them scratch their heads, tap their chins, take time to wonder, ponder and think. Wondering takes time.

For 17 years, I have had the pleasure of being educator/naturalist for hundreds of kindergarten and first grade scientists. Primary Village South in Centerville, Ohio, consists of a beautiful mix of children from all socioeconomic, ethnic, physical/learning-challenged and experiential backgrounds. Whatever their circumstances, young children give a profound glimpse into their world and their powerful wisdom.

One wintery day, we hiked into the woods. White puffs of breath were visible in the cold, still morning. Except for the lively staccato of our resident downy woodpecker, the blanketed woods were quiet. Twenty-two bundled-up 7-year-olds gathered around me, their eyes wide. We were wrapping up our study of “disgusting rot,” the dead and decaying stuff the students had conclusively deemed a treasure in nature. A student pointed to some brown, wet, dead leaves under our feet and ever so softly said, “The leaves have made a sacrifice ...” He paused for a moment, children listening to his soft voice. After a few moments, he finished his thought. “... so, the woods can go on.”

Over the entirety of the school year, my little hawks transform into amazing naturalists. They build shelters and restaurants for the animals. They create and tinker with natural loose parts and use real tools for observation and discovery. They are given the responsibility of venturing off the trail of our woods to find a special place of their own. I position myself within sight of the children, but their experience becomes one of independence and adventure. They sit quietly and absorb the forest’s sounds and sights. They have

learned to open up their “science tool kit” (five senses) and reflect on the beauty around them. Apart from screens and manmade distractions, their thoughts settle onto other things. These things become dear to their hearts and ultimately through words and illustration, find a place in their journals.

Here are a few of their entries:

“When I was there, it was peaceful and calm. I had a good day.”

“Nature made me want to draw something.”

“Nature makes me feel peaceful and very proud for being brave about being by myself.”

“I felt like the whole world belonged to me.”

“The earth has a lot to offer.”

“The world means everything to me”



Laura Peterson

Laura Peterson is a retired first grade teacher and holds a master’s degree in early childhood education. With family in Summit County, Laura has visited repeatedly for 50 years and knows first-hand the natural bounty our local wilderness offers to children of all ages.