

Getting Muddy in the Schoolyard: A New Take on the *Muddy Sneakers* Experience

by Molly Dullanty, Field Instructor

Since its beginnings in 2008, *Muddy Sneakers: The Joy of Learning Outside* has had marked success taking students to local natural areas for unique and meaningful learning experiences. With the forest as a classroom and Learning Expeditions based on their current curriculum, fifth graders have experienced science first hand, while exploring the natural world around them. The connections students make on Muddy Sneakers days improve students' Science knowledge and classroom performance. Teachers have felt more bonded with their students after a year of *Muddy Sneakers* Expeditions and have seen positive behavior extend into the classroom. Part of *Muddy Sneakers*'s success is due to the program's unique feature of being out in the field up to 12 times over the course of the academic year.



Students at West Marion Elementary School in McDowell County create models of landforms outdoors on a school softball field.

Unfortunately, *Muddy Sneakers* – like most non-profits – has felt the effects of a slow economy. Despite the enthusiasm of the 18 schools *Muddy Sneakers* worked with in the fall of 2011 and ongoing fund-raising efforts, the organization did not receive adequate funding from grants and private donations to provide full Muddy Sneakers Learning Expeditions this spring. Looking for a more financially sustainable model of programming, while maintaining our core values and mission of taking children *outside* to learn, Muddy Sneakers has introduced “Schoolyard Expeditions” as a part of its programming model.

A Schoolyard Expedition is similar to a Field Expedition in that fifth graders will be in small groups led by a Muddy Sneakers Instructor with Science learning taking place in the outdoors. As the name indicates, Schoolyard Expeditions will take place outside, on participating

schools' campuses for about two hours of the school day. *Muddy Sneakers* will implement the Schoolyard Expedition program in participating schools in the fall of 2011. A full academic year will consist of between six and eight Schoolyard Expeditions with an additional two Field Expeditions to local state parks and natural areas. Continuing to partner with schools, *Muddy Sneakers* plans to use schools' outdoor spaces as areas for learning, and to inspire teachers to do the same throughout the school year.

The organization's goal with Schoolyard Expeditions is to increase students' exposure to the outdoor classroom as a consistent part of the academic year, while structuring a program that is more financially sustainable and allows *Muddy Sneakers* to involve more schools on its waiting list in outdoor Science programming.

Students will gain awareness and respect for their school grounds with this new model. With compass in hand and toting backpacks, students will continue to practice their skills as emerging field scientists. They'll just be exploring their own backyards as well as nearby forests!

New *Muddy Sneakers* Programs Launch in Summer 2011!

Check out the Muddy Sneakers website for details on two new exciting projects Muddy Sneakers is launching in the summer of 2011, both supported by grants dedicated to these specific projects.

Summer Nature Camp, a three-day nature experience for graduating fifth graders from participating public schools, is being sponsored by a local community organization. Twenty students from Transylvania County will comprise the first year's Summer Nature Camp attendees.

Contact Fred Roane, Summer Nature Camp Director, at fred@muddysneakers.org, for details.

Thanks to two generous grants, Muddy Sneakers will be conducting three **Muddy Sneakers Teacher Training Institutes** in late July and August, training teachers in participating school districts in how to employ the Muddy Sneakers Schoolyard and Field Learning Expedition models in the 2011-12 school year.

Please be in touch with co-directors Lindsay Green (lindsay@muddysneakers.org) and Carlton Burke (carlton@muddysneakers.org) to find out how to support this professional development effort.

Meet a Field Instructor *Elsa Bledsoe*

Elsa Bledsoe is enjoying her third year as a *Muddy Sneakers* instructor. She holds a degree in Biology and has always had a passion for the outdoors. Her love of the outdoors has taken her on various adventures from studying tropical ecosystems in Costa Rica to building trails in California to monitoring plants on the Blue Ridge Parkway and leading wilderness trips at the Green River Preserve.



"One thing I love about working with Muddy Sneakers," Elsa said, "is that it's one of the few places where it's actually cool to be a nature nerd. I hope our new schoolyard expeditions will help us all to remember our intimate and often overlooked daily connections with the natural world."

Dear *Muddy Sneakers*
Friends and Supporters,

As we wind up our third full year of programming, I would like to thank all of you for your support of our partnerships with public schools to get students outdoors and learning. You have shared our mission with friends and family, and with the groups you belong to. You have given generously of your time and resources, and

have joined us for events celebrating the organization's progress. Some of you have even joined us for a day in the woods on a Learning Expedition! And over 3,000 children have benefited. Thank you!

What better way to celebrate existence of *Muddy Sneakers*, especially in light of these financial times, than to honor the words of a *Muddy Sneakers* fifth grade student, who shared this journal entry with us after a recent Field Learning Expedition. May your summer adventures be as gratifying as Ciera's day in the woods!

With gratitude,

Lauren Agrella-Sevilla, Executive Director

We hiked along the long trail. We saw many things like birds as they flap their graceful wings...and a humming bird.

You hear the beat like a heart...somewhat like yours when you see the beautiful flow of the river beneath you as you are on a wooden bridge. On that bridge, you hear the stomping of your peers like one comes on a hollow log on the ground which the story of it is unknown.

Look up at the blue sky and feel the blow of the wind against your face. Then look down at the solid rocks below and wonder where they've been.

Then fall back among the long grass and look in front of you to the lake and watch the ducks hover right above the deep water.

And then ask yourself...is this nature or your home?

By Ciera

Muddy Sneakers on UNC-TV April 28: "Exploring North Carolina" to air at 8:30 pm

What: Muddy Sneakers will be featured in an episode of "Exploring North Carolina" on UNC-TV. The program is narrated by Tom Earnhardt and was filmed on site at schools and in the forest with Muddy Sneakers last fall.

Who: The episode, from start to finish, follows the Muddy Sneakers program and features Board member Sandy Schenck, field instructors Molly Dullanty and Carlton Burke, and Muddy Sneakers teachers and students. The episode's title is "Nature's Classroom."

When: Thursday, April 28 at 8:30 pm; Friday, April 29 at 9:30 pm; Sunday, May 1 at 6 pm

Where: On UNC-TV



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