

Uncovering the Leader within- The Philadelphia Outward Bound School

John W. Eppensteiner III 17 September 2015

How do you build self-confidence? How do you teach resilience? How do you get a teenager to realize that they have more inner strength and fortitude than they could ever imagine? How do you teach compassion? For these lessons, there is no set curriculum. They are gained through experience, or more specifically, by having experiences.

This is the value that the Philadelphia Outward Bound School (POBS) brings to the students of Philadelphia – it provides them with experiences where they can challenge themselves to be stronger, tougher and more capable people than they knew they could be. These experiences, in turn, help students carry the values of compassion, integrity, excellence and inclusion into their daily lives.

The program of POBS has its roots in Aberdovey, Wales, where the original Outward Bound School was founded in 1941. Established during the height of World War II, the school helped prepare young British sailors for the harsh realities of combat. The program was “less training for the sea than through the sea” and focused on developing an

inner strength and unwavering self-reliance in its students by presenting them with challenges on the open ocean. The school's motto was "To serve, to Strive, and not to yield," the same that exists for all Outward Bound schools today.

The Philadelphia Outward Bound School delivers programming that allows 12 to 18 year-old students in the Philadelphia region to experience the environment in ways many of them have never before. Every spring, summer, and fall, small groups of students (typically 8-12 students per group) complete overnight backpacking or canoeing trips that ranging from 5 to 21 days in length. The POBS utilizes every outdoor resource that the region has available to conduct its programming, including: the Appalachian Trail; the Delaware River; and even Fairmount Park. Each course provides a variety of activities, such as canoeing, rock climbing, or high-ropes courses, through which students are pressed to challenge themselves and develop new skills. In 2014, over 4,000 students participated in POBS programming.

Each course is accompanied by an experienced outdoor instructor whose goals are to facilitate character development, build leadership skills, and form a service ethic in each of the students. Instructors lead both one-on-one and group discussions throughout the course to help students become active listeners and develop their conflict resolution skills. Students often report that one of the most satisfying aspects of the courses is the

relationships they've developed with fellow crew members.

In fact, the Philadelphia Outward Bound School has become recognized for its efficacy in building relationships, as evidenced by a special program it recently implemented for the Philadelphia School District. POBS was tapped to design a program to facilitate the merger of two rival Philadelphia high schools, Germantown and Martin Luther King, Jr, which were combined in 2013 due to budget cuts. POBS created a 6-week leadership development program for 30 students of the new high school that serve as student ambassadors. Each week students engaged in group discussions, mental and physical challenges, and completed service projects throughout Philadelphia. "When an individual goes through a profound challenging experience with a group of other individuals, they bond together as a family and that bond is built on a shared common experience," says Katie Newsom-Pastuszek, executive director of the Philadelphia Outward Bound School. These bonds must surely have held, as all reports indicate the transition went very smoothly.

Although the programming of POBS is certainly unique in the Philadelphia region, the recent partnership it formed with the city and another prominent nonprofit group qualifies as certainly one the most innovative. POBS is teaming up with the National Audubon Society (Audubon Pennsylvania) to transform an abandoned water reservoir

in East Fairmont Park into a unique education and adventure destination in the heart of Philadelphia, called the Discovery Center at Strawberry Mansion Lake.

The lake is a unique natural habitat in the city, serving as a stopover for migrating birds along the Atlantic Flyway. The Discovery Center will open up the lake to Philadelphians, and will provide a research and conservation center for the National Audubon Society. The Discovery Center will also serve as the new base of operations for POBS, allowing it to expand its course offerings. Collectively, the partnership will allow the organizations to serve over 15,000 students per year at the Discovery Center.

The Discovery Center may also become hub for facilitating a larger movement of sustainability and outdoor education in the region. The center is being designed to be a "living building" – a building that is not only net zero energy, but also helps restore the natural environment. Students that pass through its doors will not only learn how to challenge themselves on a high ropes course, or appreciate bird migrations, but they will begin to understand how to live more cooperatively with the environment and with each other. The Discovery Center will be an experience in and of itself.

The future is certainly bright for the Philadelphia Outward Bound School as it capitalizes on a growing awareness of sustainability and the value of outdoor education in the Philadelphia region. By continuing to do what it does best

– provide experiences that challenge the students of Philadelphia to be their best selves – it will continue to thrive as a social innovator.

References

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