

Educating Youth: Petzoldt's Way

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Most WEA members are very familiar with the life of Paul K. Petzoldt. We know him as a great educator, accomplished mountaineer and founder of successful organizations such as the National Outdoor Leadership School and WEA. Most folks typically associate Petzoldt with endeavors such as outdoor leadership development, environmental conservation or the education of wilderness users. But, there was another aspect of Petzoldt's life's work that received less attention. He possessed a strong sense of duty to serve youth.

We can find evidence, in the early 1960s, that Petzoldt believed youth needed experiences to develop leadership skills and to recreate safely in the outdoors. Petzoldt assisted the Lander, Wyoming Parks and Recreation Department in establishing the Lander American School of Mountaineering. This program served the youth of Lander by training them to be safe climbers. The program went on to win a national award (Bachert, 1987). Petzoldt also became involved with Outward Bound during this time. The primary focus of Outward Bound was youth development. Petzoldt's desire to serve youth never wavered in his later years. In the final years of his life along his wife, Virginia Petzoldt, they created a youth program in Maine. Ginnie and Paul established the Paul Petzoldt Leadership School for youth out of their home on Lake Sebago.

In my research to record Petzoldt's philosophy and methods, I was fortunate enough to receive the following account from the director of PPLS, Kelly Munson. I share this story through Kelly's words to demonstrate an aspect of Petzoldt's, rich philosophy that endured until he died in October of 1999.

Paul and Ginnie were watching the evening news one early summer night when a story caught Paul's attention. A 12- year old local boy had stolen a car and ended up leading a high-speed chase through the small town of Windham. The chase ended when he lost control and ran the car into a

house. Luckily, he was fine. I think just about everyone watching the news must have thought, “what a troublemaker!” Not Paul – Paul said to Ginnie, “We’ve got to get that kid. He has initiative and motivation (to take the car), he can make decisions (he didn’t say good ones), and he has agility” (to maneuver it.) He asked Ginnie to get me, and he told me the story over again himself. He asked me to go find the boy and invite him to our school. Paul wanted to meet him and encourage him to come for the summer. So, I set out to Windham Middle School the next day, and I found John Woodbury. Jon was a red headed, strong young boy with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. I could tell he lived life on the edge. It wasn’t long before my thoughts were confirmed. Most people in town knew Jon from tales in school and community adventures gone array. Rumors couldn’t slow him down and his dad and step mom were anxious for a reprieve. I invited him to come for the summer, and he arrived on our doorstep the very next weekend. I’m not sure if he or his parents actually made the decision and packed his bags, but he stayed all summer and came back the next two. He was one of the best outdoorsmen that ever came through our school even though he continued to live life both in the woods and at home on the edge. The third summer that Jon was with us; he was exploring at the top of a wet granite slide (while everyone else was relaxing after a long day) and slipped. He tumbled over 100 feet down the slide and landed unconscious with a gash in his head and a broken collarbone. It was 9:30 p.m. at night. Five other teens and an instructor used 2 weeks of PPLS training and cared for Jon through the night. Another student and an instructor hiked to get help, and a helicopter finally picked him up at 6 a.m. the next morning. After a few days in the ICU, Jon was ready to get back the group and the expedition. Only the doctors, the stitches, and the broken collarbone kept him back.

The fact that Jon wanted to come back, and did come back to visit Sebago Lake many times, tells me that Paul made a great decision after watching

the evening news. He didn't see a troublemaker - he saw a young boy with misguided potential. He saw a boy who had character ripe for development. Jon is a junior in high school today. He has a steady job and is doing just fine.

Paul wanted to put young kids in the position where they had to make real decisions in real situations that had real consequences. When we developed the Paul Petzoldt Leadership School, his vision also included developing young kids to be active caring members of their community, society, and the world. He wanted them to know that they owned the White House and the BLM land that occupies half of Wyoming, and all the national parks and their state's parks too. He wanted them to think and care about others and their well-being. We went into the woods to learn and to have fun, but we also went into the woods and surrounding communities to do service. Our mission was to prepare people for successful leadership on outdoor expeditions and in their "expedition of life." We thought if we could have the opportunity to educate today's youth, we could ultimately have a tremendous effect on preparing them for a successful life. As confident leaders and responsible citizens, they would make beneficial impacts on society, wilderness, and the general welfare of world.

K. Munson (personal communication, November 20, 2001)

Unfortunately, PPLS was unable to continue once Petzoldt passed away. Kelly Munson packed PPLS in the Petzoldt's attic on Lake Sebago. She hopes one day that she will find the support to resurrect the program. What is important to remember was Petzoldt's unyielding devotion to his life's work. He devoted a lifetime to the education and development of others through outdoor education.

It is critical that we record stories like the one shared by Kelly Munson. The outdoor education profession has a rich tradition of influential leaders that have shaped who we

are. If you have a Petzoldt story of your own, do not let it slip away. Please send your story to me, so it can be added to the body of knowledge that shapes our rich tradition. Send correspondence to: mcwagstaff@stcloudstate.edu

(A special thanks to Kelly Munson for her work and for sharing her story.)

References

Bachert, D.W. (1987). The NOLS experience: Experiential education in the wilderness. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina.