Exploring the wilds of Illinois, 24 Chicago-area high school students earned recognition as Illinois' first YCC Ambassadors.

Youth Conservation Conference

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos Courtesy Fishin' Buddies!, Inc.

Through the YCC program, Chicago-area high school students worked with resources professionals to develop an understanding of natural resources and management issues.

John Kidd, Jr. was one of the founders of the non-profit Fishin' Buddies!, Inc. organization in 1991. Originally designed to introduce children to fishing, the organization later expanded to conduct conservation and environmental education programs for thousands of Chicago-area youths. Desiring to further their youth outreach efforts, in June 2009 Fishin' Buddies!, Inc. premiered a week-long Youth Conservation Conference, affectionately dubbed "Boot Camp."

Interested high school students were required to complete an application and submit recommendations, then undergo a rigorous interview. The 24 sophomores and juniors selected descended on the campus of Chicago State University, where they were divided into six-person teams. Together, team members traveled to three habitat sites within Cook County to work with resource professionals. Their evenings were dedicated to researching a contemporary environmental issue. Posters and speeches on the topics were presented—and judged by a panel of environmental professionals—during a closing banquet attended by family and their mentors.

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County was a major financial sponsor of YCC internships. Various sites within the FPD hosted the hands-on learning segments of the program.

Herb Dreier, DNR Urban Fishing Program coordinator, served as a group leader for four participants, assisting with their field work and advising the group on their final presentation.

"This program was the first time the majority of the participants had ever been involved in these types of activities," Dreier said. "There was a lot packed into the five days, and they are to be commended for embracing the program and all it entailed."

Monnikka Edgeston, who had just completed her sophomore year, was a Boot Camp participant. Her career path goal, to produce films, veered slightly after Boot Camp and her internship with Sand Ridge Nature Center; now nature films pique her interest. Her mother recalls being stunned with the quality of the final presentations.

"The enthusiasm of the presenters really showed what they learned—and they learned a lot," Edgeston said. "And so did everyone in the audience."

Working with Fishin' Buddies!, Inc. volunteers were a team of resource professionals from the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, USDA Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Department of Natural Resources, Chicago State University, Chicago Park District and The Field Museum. Sponsoring agencies included the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Arcelor Mittal, the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelly Foundation, Chicago Wilderness and FPD of Cook County.

Guided by mentors from partner organizations, the youth worked in professional environments, learning science techniques, how to identify plants and animals and received hands-on experience managing urban waters, wetlands and parklands. In the process, team work and leadership skills were honed.

Following graduation, internships were offered to interested participants: the sophomores were hired for three-week paid internships with Fishin' Buddies and juniors a six-week internship with the FPD of Cook County.

FPD of Cook County General Superintendent Dr. Steven M. Bylina, Jr. recapped the six-week internships some of the Boot Camp graduates completed with the FPD.

"The structure of the program immersed urban youth in conservation topics, and introduced them to a lot of important educational topics in a short, but enjoyable, way," said Bylina. "At times the work was difficult, the days long and the weather extreme, but the participants remained eager, polite, hard-working, in good spirits and ready to take on the next challenge."

Sixteen-year-old Thomas Maloney was one of FPD interns.

"I was absolutely thrilled with the intensity of the program, how much the participants learned and the expertise

Participants learned that managing natural resources requires numerous tools—from computers to seines to electronic scales and more.

Hours of work went into preparing their final project: a presentation on a contemporary environmental issue made before an audience of resource professionals, including DNR Assistant Director John Rogner (right).

that was available to them," recalled Thomas' mother, Cathy Maloney. "Job shadowing was an absolutely wonderful experience. They were doing real work, not just busy work. They got wet and muddy doing fisheries samples, demonstrated techniques at environmental fairs and conducted water samples. And, with six weeks of working in all the forest preserves, Thomas learned just how big Cook County really is."

Laurel Ross, Urban Conservation Director for The Field Museum and Chair of the Executive Council of Chicago Wilderness, served on the YCC planning committee.

"By design, the YCC program exposes young people to other places in the region and state and, as a result, they develop a much broader view of the world," Ross explained. "Having the experience of being somewhere different enriches their lives in a way no textbook or classroom situation can."

What did YCC Ambassadors do?

Lake evaluations
Fisheries inventory
Tree and plant identification
Habitat ecology
Habitat restoration
Bird banding
Fossil and track discovery
Plat survey
Water chemistry sampling
Aquatic vegetation and macroinvertebrate sampling and identification
Soil sampling and testing
Watershed analysis
Data and research collection
Journaling
Oral presentation

"Opportunities such as this provide youth with a spark to get them thinking about what they want to do in life," remarked John Rogner, DNR assistant director who participated in the inaugural event as a representative for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "The program was intense, with participants working into the evening on their independent projects, and I was impressed with their enthusiasm and interest in natural resources. Hopefully, after this structured introduction to natural resources careers, some of these young adults will a pursue career in some environmental field."

The proof of any investment of time and effort is key to determining success. Students were asked a series of questions at the beginning and end of Boot Camp, measuring changes in their fear of the outdoors, natural resource knowledge and understanding of environmental careers. Students showed marked improvement on post-tests, with a 65 percent improvement in fear of the outdoors, 69 percent improvement on careers and a 78 percent increase in resource knowledge.

In the months since the internships ended, John Kidd was named as one of Governor Pat Quinn's 2009 Environmental Heroes—an honor bestowed to those demonstrating a strong commitment to the health and protection of the environment of Illinois. And, yet, this humble youth mentor continues to be amazed at the extent to which this summer program has already touched the lives of Chicago youth.

"I am impressed by the enthusiasm that continues to this day," Kidd explained. "Participants have worked with elementary students to help them understand environmental topics. They served Thanksgiving dinner to senior citizens, and held a food drive, then hosted a Christmas party for six families. These are things they've never done, but with the leadership skills they're developing they are eager to take on new challenges."

And according to Kidd, the truly telling feature of the success of Boot Camp is that "the participants are calling to find out what is going on and what they can do."

This summer, a new cohort of YCC ambassadors will be trained, the 2009 ambassadors will receive another internship opportunity and a couple will return to Boot Camp as counselors.

Experiences generate sparks. The future holds great promise of brilliance.

To learn more about Fishin' Buddies and YCC Ambassadors, visit fishin-buddies.net.