

## AN OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS TO CARE ABOUT THEIR LEARNING

### Woodstock Middle School, Woodstock, Vermont

Deb Pelkey was a seasoned middle school math and geography teacher with over 15 years of teaching under her belt in Woodstock, Vermont when the opportunity came along to join A Forest for Every Classroom (FFEC), a year-long team training approach based outdoors on the lands of the National Park Service's Marsh, Billings, Rockefeller National Historic Site. She was already part of a Woodstock Middle School high-function team committed to educating the whole student and providing interdisciplinary learning that was student-centered, experiential and, most importantly, meaningful.



“A Forest for Every Classroom proposed to bring together a group of partners, public land management agencies and non-profit educational organizations to assist educators in creating a curriculum that fostered stewardship through integrated use of our local forests,” said Pelkey. “... I decided to apply to the program simply to secure a relationship with our national park, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park... I did not want to be left out.” What she didn't know at the time was

that this yearlong endeavor with a series of two-day workshops and a five-day summer institute on place-based teaching, would ultimately transform her teaching.

“The forest as a living classroom is ever changing and evolving. Students and teachers come to feel connected to that change...I came to understand that breaking down classroom walls was an effective path to students becoming caring stewards of the larger world. It was those real connections to the forest, to people in the community that brought the vital component of caring into the classroom. Students today want to make a positive dent in their world. The best way to do that is to show them their world, and put them solidly in it.”

Community-based FFEC is also about meeting educational standards. Pelkey's classes met and exceeded expectations on standards of reasoning and quantitative skill sets. Her students worked with the park foresters to conduct a rich array of forest resource inventories. They sorted the data and made predictions for the forest's future.

“Their desks were fallen logs, and my podium was glacial boulders,” said Pelkey. Importantly, the data they collected were used to serve the community in a variety of ways, including raising money for a local conservation project.

“Students were really creative about the service component of their work. Their data was used to create a “Carriage Trail” trail mix to sell at school; others captured the views and voices in our local forests by creating, publishing, and selling a calendar.

They took their earnings and supported the restoration of a local landmark. In addition, they reforested a section of the park.”

## **Lessons Learned**

**The value of partnerships:** When community is at the center of learning, partnerships– though they can hard to maintain–can create a great deal of symmetry. New doors open. Helping hands appear. Everyone benefits.

**The value of values-based learning:** FFEC is values based. We try to model values for our students; when this is reinforced by the community and the curriculum, the impact on students can be life changing.

**The value of stories:** “One time in the forest an old stone wall reminded a student of a story his grandfather had told him about growing up in Vermont. Upon finding an old sugaring tap, another student, I would describe as struggling, stepped up to describe in vivid detail his family’s fourth generation sugaring operation. These students were animated in new ways by the outdoor classroom.

**The value of students as teachers:** “For many of my students, the outdoors is their best learning environment, the place where they feel safe enough to share what they know. In the classroom, students who often feel restricted can share their understanding of logging, tracking, hiking and more. These are the experiences that have most shaped their lives. FFEC validates much of that experience and models lifelong learning.”