

Finally, A Classroom that Works

By Debra Pelkey for A Forest for Every Classroom

A Forest for Every Classroom changed my perspective on the definition of a learning environment. While in college, Carol King playing on the stereo and the national news peppered with reports on the war in Vietnam, I spent my classroom hours preparing for what I hoped would be a career in teaching. During my practicum, I began to dream of lovely desks all lined up in tidy rows, thematic bulletin boards which would change according to season and class content, the well organized and professional teacher desk, and the most envied podium from which I would dispense information for my eager audience. And, when I was hired for my first teaching position as a social studies teacher, my classroom met all of these expectations. It was 1976 and I was the model world geography teacher with the model 7th grade classroom. I would lecture, they would memorize, I would prepare and they would learn. I waxed poetic about places far away, about civilizations and people who came before us, they would label map after map. I pulled down the window shades so that we could truly focus on our world studies. My students could define specialized vocabulary and create wonderful monuments, tributes to those who came before us. Oh, and how they learned, 12 and 13 year old boys and girls, passing the tests, creating the projects, raising their hands. Learned, they did. Or did they? Did they truly understand what was being taught, would they remember what they learned, and, perhaps more importantly, did they even care about what they were learning? It was expected, it was what I expected, it was what I was taught to expect.

And then I left teaching, not unusual for many women of my generation when they began their families. Fifteen years later, I returned to teach both world geography and mathematics. Junior high was now middle school. Teachers and students functioned as teams, our practice broadened to educate the whole student, to provide interdisciplinary learning opportunities which were student-centered, experiential and, most importantly, meaningful. It was time now for students to truly understand, to care about their learning. To care enough to ask questions and seek answers. This was when FFEC entered by life, not only as a teaching professional but as a person.

As a result of the recent creation in our town of Vermont's first national park, national park staff made a presentation to our faculty about a unique opportunity for collaboration. The Forest for Every Classroom project would 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. I decided to apply to the program simply to secure a relationship with our national park, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park. Quite simply I did not want to be left out. This was to be a yearlong endeavor with a series of two day workshops and a five day summer institute. Not a science teacher, I

anticipated the likelihood of incorporating much of the training into my lessons to be unlikely. What I learned was that changing my lessons was not the mission, changing my instruction, expanding my classroom, would be key. It was unexpected. I discovered that ultimately place based education would transform my teaching.

FFEC energized my teaching, stoking my curiosity. It caused me to wonder about my special place here in the forests of Vermont. I was outdoors, learning about the natural world, its inherent beauty, and the lessons it had to teach me about the people and processes that came before. The forest was a living classroom, ever changing and evolving. I felt connected to my place and my role as a teacher in a way I had never experienced. This program was not solely for teachers of science but for educators of children. And how did this renewed spirit and passion translate in my classroom? I knew now that if my students were to truly understand, to care about their learning, then this process of breaking down the classroom walls could only foster their natural inquisitiveness and inherent desire to know. The use of our natural and cultural environment would allow my students to explore, test their learning, and make connections with others and their place here in our community. I knew now that only after learning about one's own place, and fostering a love for that place, would my students ever truly be able to learn or care about the larger world, their global village. It was no longer just about creating learners but creating stewards. Time would be given to question, to wonder, to care.

I took my standards based unit on proportional reasoning to the forest. We learned who counted the trees, how they counted the trees, and more importantly, why they counted the trees. My students worked with the park forester to conduct a circle sweep inventory. They sorted the data and made predictions for the forest's future. Their desks were fallen logs, my podium was now the forest. By fostering their inquisitiveness they now cared enough to learn and to act. Service learning followed. 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, planted trees, and made a difference.

Over the years, I have participated in and enjoyed numerous professional development opportunities and written numbers of place based units of study. I have attended motivating workshops and carefully crafted conferences. But FFEC was different. This was a partnership. The learning opportunities provided by FFEC have been ongoing and always value based. By creating ties to local resources and links with the community I have been able to customize my classroom, whether on the school

campus, on the trail or in the forest. FFEC encouraged me to develop my own sense of appreciation for the forest and my place here in Vermont. There is much more to the forest than trees, there are many stories to be told. FFEC has provided me with the resources to discover these stories on my own, to develop my own relationship with this place just as I would want for my students.

How can I measure the difference FFEC has had on my classroom experience? I can measure in the moments spent with my students, which would not have been possible without the support and professional development that the program provided. That moment when, while standing under a deteriorating deer stand in the forest, a student would teach his classmates about hunting with such clarity and respect it was as if he were spouting poetry. Or that time, when 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, a student, one might describe as struggling, stepped up to describe in vivid detail and accuracy the science of sugaring. They were learning, applying and sharing because it was important and they cared.

As a teacher, my place based units of studies created numerous opportunities for my students to teach me, and each other. When we are in the forest, whether inventorying trees, reading the landscape, or searching for clues to our agricultural past, it is this place which brings us together as learners. It is something we share. Yet, this common experience is that which connects us to others in our community. For many of my students, the outdoors is their best learning environment, the place where they feel safe. You know FFEC is working when your students become your best teachers, when students who are often restricted within the traditional classroom walls can soar as they share their understanding of logging, tracking, hiking and more. These are experiences that shape their lives, experiences they will remember.

It's 2012 and I am two years from retirement. FFEC has been a driving force in my instruction for the last decade. FFEC gave me the support I needed to rethink the learning environment I wanted to create. It gave me the safety net to no longer worry what was on the walls of my classroom but to break down those walls altogether. My experience and work with FFEC has given me the courage to no longer rely on "telling" my students about places, but to allow them to experience and appreciate their place here. Some might say that being a FFEC alumni makes me special, I would say that it makes me different. It forever changed my teaching, it was not what I expected, it was so much more. I will leave teaching with far more passion than I had in 1976. I am no longer just teaching about places- I have found my place, and have guided many students along their journey of discovery. As for my classroom, there is often mud on the rug, hiking boots regularly replace high heels, there are more Biltmore sticks than yardsticks, and my classroom windows are my ever changing bulletin boards. Soon I

will head into the forest again with my students, and we will learn, and wonder, and care about this place together. Finally, I have the model learning environment, the proper classroom.