

# Lifestyles

## BACK TO BASICS

*PUSD teachers give kids a lesson in the great outdoors*

By Laura Rhizor

Every summer for the past 15 years, a group of California kids desert their material worlds of videos, stereos, surfboards, and shopping malls—not to mention flush toilets and showers—and disappear into the Sierra Nevada wilderness with only the belongings they can carry on their backs.

Possessions, they realize, aren't that necessary. What's important is the friendships that are created, the ties that are strengthened, and the smiles that are shared.

Their leaders are Eddie Lindros, a math teacher at Meadowbrook Middle School, and Dennis Bueker, a teacher at Sundance Elementary.

When the two men connected, Bueker had been teaching a backpacking enrichment course, which was offered as part of the regular summer school curriculum. He recruited Lindros, who had done backpacking with the YMCA, to help him out.

At that time, the program was totally supported by the Poway Unified School District. Proposition 13, however, eliminated it. "So for a year, we just stopped doing it," Lindros said. "But then, parents started calling us, and they said, 'Hey, we'll pay for it.' Ann Nelson, a real community leader at the time, got together a lot of other parents, and they all said they wanted this backpacking course to continue."

So Lindros and Bueker "worked out a deal" with the PUSD, and backpacking is now offered as part of the Community Services program. Parents pay for the trips, which includes the meals, the cooking utensils, the transportation and the leadership.



**Sitting in a cold mountain stream was one way of relaxing after a long hike.**

On their first trip 15 years ago, they took 33 kids 21 miles to the summit of Mt. Whitney and back. This summer there are three trips, for 160 kids, covering 30 days and a total of 200 miles.

The trips are divided into sections according to grade level and ability. Section A and Section B are for the beginning and intermediate backpackers.

The A section, for students presently in 5th or 6th grade, travels this week either a 35 or 45 mile trail from Agnew Meadow to the Devil's Postpile.

The B section was for students in grades 7 and 8 and is divided into three groups. It covered 69 miles from Mammoth Lakes to Yosemite Valley. The trip was July 29-Aug. 8.

Lindros and Bueker say they start planning the trips in January. They are required to have their wilderness permits by March 1, and from April 15 to the middle of May they are busy signing up kids and answering questions. Lindros says he spends a number of hours just keeping up his license to drive the school bus Bueker says the arrangements take more effort than teaching all winter.

Prior to the trip, mandatory meetings are held for instruction and planning. Participants divide into groups and plan their own menus (which makes for 40 separate orders of dehydrated food packages), and each person, in addition to being responsible for carrying his own personal items and snacks for the road, must carry a portion of the meals or the cooking kit for the group. "We take a special pride in teaching them to backpack the right way," Bueker said. For example, the foil packets the food is packaged in cannot be thrown on the ground, they must be carried through the end of the trip.

Students are instructed to backpack only one-third of their weight. Many, however,

carry more. Sixteen-year-old Jennifer Koerber, carried 53 pounds this year. Others in her group (all girls) averaged 46 pounds.

Bueker remembers one little girl, who, after they reached their wilderness dropoff site, was surprised to start hiking. She said, "I thought we were just going to camp by the bus."

For some of the 5th graders, it may be their first time away from home.

Parent Kathi Kern of Lakeside remembers her youngest son Jake's first trip.

"He wanted me to pick him up the first year, but I said 'Son, you'd never forgive yourself if I came to get you.' When he did come home, at the end of the trip, he told me he was glad he stayed with it. This year, he couldn't wait to go."

Gene Carswell also is an experienced light-load packer; he turns his shirts inside-out and wears the kind of shorts with underwear already in them. But he does, like several of his returning friends, make sure he brings a portable lawn chair, which somehow fits in his pack.

From their list of returning backpackers, Lindros and Bueker select those students who have demonstrated a consistent positive attitude and an ability to lead, and give them the privilege of a free A or B trip in exchange for their help with the younger groups.

Each teaching assistant has his own special thing he does for the younger kids. One, for example, brought brightly colored neckties for his group to wear.

They all help out with the fun activities, such as talent night, the m&m relay races, and the "backpacker olympics."

This is Jennifer Koerber's 2nd year as an assistant and she demonstrates that the leaders, as well as the younger ones, benefit.

"It's fun to be a leader. It makes me feel older," she said. The younger kids look up to us, and come to us when they need help. And now, after having some experience as a leader, and in a group, I feel more relaxed and confident around others.

Jennifer's mother, Kathi, says both of her daughters—16 year-old Jennifer and 14-year-old Joanne—started backpacking with their father, and now they love going with a group of people.

"They are learning responsibility," Kathi said. "It's safe and educational. But it is also grueling, and they know it. It's everything from mosquitos to blisters on their ankles, but they go for the friendship."

Guy Atherton, who helped finance this year's trip by getting a paper route, helping his sister with her kids, and "doing jobs for Eddie, like cleaning the bus after the trip," says his favorite part of the trip is meeting new people every year from different schools.

"And then later on in the summer I will see them at the beach, and we remember each other from backpacking," he said.

For 15-year-old Ryan Bazler, who will be a sophomore at Mt. Carmel next year, it is "the highlight of his summer," according to his mother, Marilyn.

All of the kids Lindros points out, really just go to have fun. But in retrospect, they have learned a lot.

"It is hard to measure growth of character," he said. "But many parents have told me that their children's perceptions of themselves have been enhanced by the trip."

Lindros observes that when the kids are going downhill, or during the few times they are on level ground, "they talk and joke around. But when they are trudging uphill, they are thinking their own thoughts, thinking about their life—about their future."

Some parents have allowed their children to participate, despite low grades, because they see the trip as a way of building confidence.

"Backpacking," Lindros explains, "can be



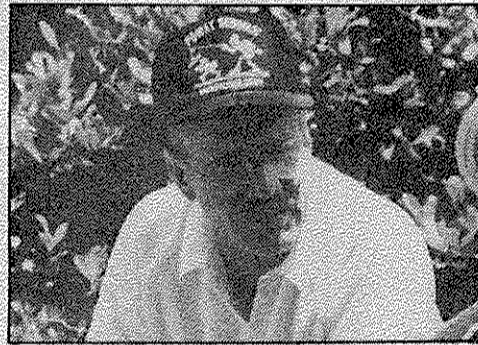
**Shannon Chesterfield and Jennifer Commons get the tent up following the day's hike in the Sierra Nevadas.**



**Guy Atherton takes a well-deserved break after hiking.**

like an island of success amid a tumultuous world, this is one thing they can do well."

Yet as parents send their children on this wilderness adventure, hoping they will return inspired, strengthened, and self-assured, Lindros and Bueker also come back with a new outlook.



"... when they are trudging uphill, they are thinking ... about their future."

— Eddie Lindros

"For me," Lindros asserts, "it really charges my batteries. When I'm around 23 bright, vivacious, eager kids, who are all so full of potential, it makes me feel good. It boosts me. I still get a heightened feeling of being alive, and I don't get tired. Their energy is transferred to me."

"We live in California—a state with more people per mile than any other state, and yet we go up in the mountains, and walk along a trail, and see a beautiful majestic view, and sometimes we won't see any other people for a couple of days."

"I really like to have a pure experience—no contacts with civilization for 10 days. I like to stay in the wilderness. I don't want to see stores, roads, cars, or anything for 10 days."

Lindros adds that there is a carry-over benefit in the classroom, too.

"The younger kids in the first groups will be going to my school," he said. "And when they come on the first day, and see me out there, with my yard duty, they will remember me. And if I ask them to do something, like pick up a piece of trash, they will listen. They will remember that man Eddie, who took them backpacking."

Since Dennis Bueker is an elementary school teacher and deals primarily with the younger groups, he has different feelings about the program.

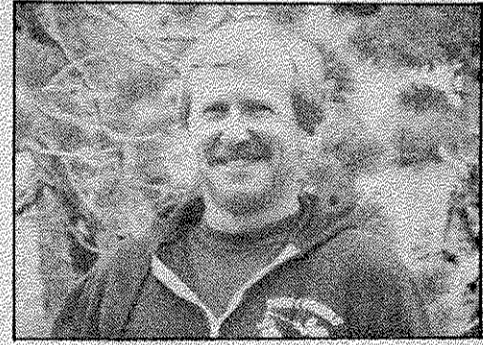
"For me, it's introducing the kids to backpacking," he said. "We are helping them grow up—to become more mature—to be more organized. They can't be irresponsible. In the wilderness, we explain to them that the consequences are immediate. For example if I am teaching them how to use the stove and they don't listen, they will suffer. They will be uncomfortable. It is a learning experience for them."

"We spend all of their school years teaching them how to prepare for that big job someday—but that is a long way off for them. In backpacking, we are teaching them to listen now, to use their skills now,

and not someday down the road."

They both are proud that their journeys have influenced so many lives.

"We run into kids out there on the trail who have been in our program, who are with forest service now," Bueker said. "We saw one guy who was in our program in



"We are helping them grow up — to become more mature — to be organized."

— Dennis Bueker

1973."

They realize that the safest thing for a school district to do in the summer is nothing. Yet they've never had a serious injury. And they see the program as good publicity for Poway schools. All leaders wear "Poway Schools Backpacking Staff" shirts, and other groups just starting out look to them as experienced hikers.

"I've already got my route planned for next year," Lindros said, his eyes brightening. "Next year, we'll go 90 miles. It will be great."



**Tracy Lehman crosses a stream while carrying a 50-pound pack.**