

Backpacking Reflection

by Liz Biagioli

Traditionally at WCS, the eighth grade class kicks off their year by participating in a five-day Outward Bound Wilderness course. Students work with their peers to successfully hike and camp on a stretch of the Appalachian Trail. This is an excellent opportunity for students to partake in an adventure structured to encourage growth and discovery, while building leadership skills, confidence, and self-reliance in nature. This has been a most beneficial experience for our students and is made possible by the Kate Svitek Memorial Foundation.

The eighth grade trip begins with "duffle shuffle" where students learn how to pack and pack only what they need for themselves and their group of twelve. They all too soon find the value in these lessons when they heave their sixty-pound pack onto their backs, moaning and groaning the twenty-feet to the vans. Vans loaded, students head off to the woods near Pine Grove Furnace. The sun begins to go low in the horizon. They are off to find their first campsite as darkness sets in around them. Outside of the city hustle and bustle, students are now surrounded by quiet. It is peaceful, yet eerie, as many are not used to such an auditory experience. Reassurances and support are given and received as they make their way uphill to camp. The work has just begun. Students break into teams to set up their shelters of tarps, hang a critter line, and make a much-desired dinner. The day ends with an evening meeting of reflection.

The trip continues for four more days. Some days include ten-mile hikes in the rain to get to the next camp, rock-climbing, navigating to much needed water, learning and relearning knots, standing in a circle until someone takes the last piece of un-claimed gear, and of course taking the wrong trail until students work together to find where they are on the map. Throughout the week, students are challenged intellectually and emotionally outside of their comfort zones. They are pushed to build their skills as leaders, team players, time-managers, organizers, and conservationists. This new adventure comes with ups and

downs, hums and haws, laughter, achy feet, newly found friends, and tiredness. In this week of challenges, there is success! Stopping suddenly in the middle of the trail on day four, one student raises his hands up into the air, looks to the sky and yells, "I love doing this!"