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ELP SECTION

Living and breathing conservation

Environmental Leadership Program completes its 15th year at East Elgin

By Rob Perry

of The Aylmer Express

East Elgin Secondary School teacher Duncan Sinclair was taught at an early age a love for the outdoors, fostered by his father Dr. Duncan Sinclair of Aylmer, a former president of Ducks Unlimited Canada.

"We lived and breathed conservation."

And now, Mr. Sinclair says, he's the luckiest teacher in the world, because he gets to pass on that passion to students in a special Environmental Leadership Program, which just completed its 15th year at EESS.

The program takes students into the outdoors, to learn canoeing, forestry management, the natural environment of flora and fauna, mountain biking, rock climbing, snowshoeing, wilderness survival, and how the teenagers involved can in turn convey the same lessons to even younger children through annual events such as Marsh Quest and the Carolinian Forest Festival, and the new Carolinian Carnival.

ELP "is about life lessons through outdoor lessons," challenging students mentally, physically and socially, as Mr. Sinclair was himself as a child.

He provides "a great big bowl of things, full of opportunities. If each kid takes something from the bowl, that's where their passion will begin.

"And passion is the root of conservation and resource management."

If his students didn't have the opportunities ELP offered, he said, many would never develop a true appreciation of the natural world, and understand the value of working to preserve it.

But, he added, ELP was "a two-way street."

He concentrated on focusing his students on the environment and its wonders, and their energy kept him going until "All of a sudden, the semester's over."

He spent half the school year away from EESS with his class, and the other half much of his time was spent preparing for the next semester, includ-

ing selecting new students for the program.

That took him away from his colleagues a great deal and, even worse, his wife Dana and their son Coll.

He appreciated how his family allowed him to devote so much of his time and energy to ELP.

The program was a success because of them, the many sponsors who helped fund the program, the students and partners such as the Catfish Creek Conservation Authority, Elgin Stewardship and Jaffa Outdoor Environmental Education Centre.

The idea for ELP came to him in the mid-1990s, after he heard of a teacher from Madoc, north of Belleville, who had developed a four-credit high school environmental leadership class.

"My jaw hit the table," because it so closely conformed to Mr. Sinclair's own conservation ideals.

But setting up the program, tailored to the local environment here, took several years.

While EESS then-Principal Jack Couckuyt gave the project the green light, the school couldn't provide any funding, so Mr. Sinclair had to go out and find his own.

About \$40,000 was needed to run ELP each year, with \$25,000 now coming from volunteer fundraising and donations from local organizations such as the Aylmer Optimist Club.

Elgin Stewardship and CCCA offered their support as well, and the first class got off the ground in 2000.

Mr. Sinclair said the program was at first aimed at giving students with an existing passion for the outdoors a head start in the competition to become Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources employees.

But the class quickly opened up to others who were just interested in the environment, and within a short time what had been a mostly male program was split evenly between young men and women.

The program was for students bound for university and college education, he noted.

All activities were aimed at developing ELP's "Seven Pillars"—respect, responsibility, dependability, work ethic, trust, accountability and commitment.

Those traits were now what he was looking for when selecting students for the program, and that had paid off.

"It's the kids who have made this program successful."

He didn't look at academic marks as much as attendance, behaviour and attitude during their previous years at EESS when choosing students.

Those who wanted to enrol first had to submit early in the year a cover letter, résumé and other supporting materials such as awards and certificates, so no one applied casually.

Then interviews were conducted after the March break to select those who would enter ELP's class next autumn.

Because he was away from school so much in the fall, he personally knew only about a third of the students who were applying.

That resulted in surprises, mostly pleasant ones, he said. The class's leader of the year often started out as a dark horse, but showed their character through the program's experiences.

Students, like in any other course, got as much out of ELP as they put in.

This year's Carolinian Carnival at East Elgin Community Complex in January, which attracted 600 visitors, was totally planned, designed and created by ELP students, he said. All he did was provide a budget.

The ELP students had been inspired, Mr. Sinclair noted, by a class alumni, Lauren Selby, who now worked at Jaffa Outdoor Education Centre, who challenged them to do what they could to encourage conservation in this area.

While the program was considered "high risk" for students in school terms, ELP had a clean injury record except for some scrapes and bruises, and one or two canoes tipping in rough water.

Every student enrolled had also graduated, he said. He kept them too busy to get left by the wayside.

Retired teacher Judi Wright and Corey Van Den Nest, an ELP graduate who's now a professional firefighter in Kitchener, accompanied him and the class on four expeditions a year.

Ron Casier, a retired teacher from St. Joseph's Catholic High School in St. Thomas was also extremely helpful with the Marsh Quest and Forest Festival events.

Others aided with fundraising events such as a fish fry and annual draw.

CCCA, Elgin Stewardship and Jaffa Outdoor Education Centre all helped provide instruction and practical experience to the students, and Mr.

Sinclair also praised EESS's administration and support staff for their contributions to making ELP work.

Why did he do it, and continue to do so?

The energy, enthusiasm and smiles of his students "fill my gas tank up again," he said.

He was always seeking new experiences for his students, this year including a new archery instruction program in co-operation with East Elgin Sportsman's Association.

The class calendar was pretty full now, he said, but they'd somehow made time for the Carolinian Carnival, so anything was possible.

He had at least eight more years until he retired, and couldn't see doing anything but ELP until then.

"I like coming to work every day," he said. "It's just a sad day, that last day in Algonquin Park," when the class came to an end after spending a semester with his 24 students.

He kept in touch with many of his alumni, he said, especially now through social media. Some came back to be speakers to new classes.

He hoped, someday, in his dreams, for an ELP graduate to return to EESS to take over the class.

For now, he said, anyone interested in supporting the program could contact him through EESS.