

## Outdoor School Turns 50!

*By Ellen Will*

Fall 2006

It's a year of anniversaries at Shaver's Creek. ORION is in its tenth year. The center itself is thirty. And Outdoor School (ODS)—the center's mainstay program, which began long before Shaver's Creek was even an idea—is now celebrating half a century of helping fifth- and sixth-graders explore nature.

Chances are pretty good that you or someone you know has participated in Outdoor School. In the fall of 1955 Penn State's College of Education and College of Physical Education and Athletics developed a pilot program to incorporate "outdoor education and school camping" into the Pennsylvania school curriculum. In October 1956 fifty students, their teachers, and Penn State faculty and student teachers gathered at the Civil Engineering Lodge in the Stone Valley Recreation Area to enjoy a week of school camping. At that time, some of the program's goals were to provide "realistic and meaningful learning experiences to enrich the school curriculum, the teaching of conservation of natural resources, and direct experience in around-the-clock social living."

Following the pilot program a survey was conducted of the teachers, students, and counselors. One teacher remarked, "It has been five weeks since we returned from camp. The children are still happy and enthusiastic about their experience. In my opinion the greatest values to be gained from a week at school camp are of a social and recreational nature. Children learned to live, play, and work with others. Our week at camp was good fun and good for us."

Around 1980, Outdoor School was shifted to Shaver's Creek Environmental Center, under the direction of Gerald "Corky" Potter. Even today, the purpose of the program remains relatively unchanged from that of the first pilot program. At ODS the elementary students and their college counselors participate in a variety of natural history and ecology lessons as well as teambuilding exercises, recreation activities, and, of course, campfires! The program now operates out of Camp Blue Diamond, near Petersburg, Pennsylvania, where participants enjoy winterized cabins and a more camp-like atmosphere.

Steven, a Lewistown Elementary fifth-grader who attended ODS in April 2006, had this to say, "The whole Outdoor School experience was awesome. The campfires were really cool... I made a lot of friends when I was there. My favorite thing was meeting new people... I wish I could go again." Another Lewistown student, Anna, commented, "I learned a lot more than I thought I would. I really liked it there, and I even started to

recycle and have zero food waste."

The Penn State students who serve as cabin counselors have equally meaningful experiences during Outdoor School. Alex, an elementary education major, remarked, "Outdoor School was a wonderful experience for me because it was the first time that I had an opportunity to get some actual teaching and leadership experience with the same-aged children that I hope someday to teach."

Our ultimate goal at Outdoor School is to provide elementary students with a positive outdoor experience that we hope will inspire them to continue exploring and discovering on their own. Here's to fifty more years of great campfires and lasting memories!

*If you know a Penn State student who is interested in being an ODS counselor, please have him/her contact the Outdoor School director at [eeb11@psu.edu](mailto:eeb11@psu.edu).*