

AWLS - Summer 2019

Valley School of Ligonier science teachers, Carole Wright and Brandon Snyder, traveled to Wyoming this summer to participate in the American Wilderness Leadership School (AWLS). Their attendance was made possible through the generosity of the Pittsburgh Chapter of Safari Club International. While nestled in the Granite Creek Canyon just east of Jackson, WY, Ms. Wright and Mr. Snyder learned alongside educators from all over the country. Workshops focused on outdoor skills, sportsmanship, conservation, and environmental science.

The entire experience was inspiring and rejuvenating for us. We both have a background in the life sciences and environmental education, so the setting of the Safari Club lodge could not have been more amazing. We felt warmly welcomed and taken care of for the duration of our visit, with well-planned activities and excellent food. In reflecting upon our overall experience, pieces that stick out were how we were awestruck by what we experienced in nature, the information we gained from our firearms and conservation lessons, and our overall takeaways and hopes for the future.

Both of us are passionate about the outdoors, nature, and travel; therefore, spending a week near Granite Creek and the Grand Tetons was an experience that we appreciated immensely. One of our first classes was spent learning about the biology and geology of the area while looking out at Granite Creek and the Gros Ventre Mountains. We were able to use all of our senses to take in the experience. We saw the shades of greens of the plants and the grays of the cliffs, while observing the effects of forest fires and invasive species on the trees. We smelled the fresh mountain air, and felt the effects of the altitude and lack of humidity. We heard the chirping of birds and chiselers, or ground squirrels. During every outdoor experience of the trip, the beauty of nature was inspiring and overwhelming.

In addition to the unforgettable experiences we had in nature during our stay, we participated in many programs focused on conservation, ecology, firearms, and blending all of the topics together. As science teachers, we are both enthusiastic to relate our classes to the outdoors and the environment by getting our students outside as often as possible. The AWLS program followed the same philosophy, while providing us with new teaching methods and strategies. The Project Wild curriculum is a valuable resource for incorporating engaging, educational ecology lessons into classes. A strength of this program is its interdisciplinary aspects, incorporating concepts from math, language arts, and social studies into many of their lesson plans. We enjoyed spending time in Granite Creek collecting and observing macroinvertebrates, a practice that both of us are very familiar with. We did not expect how exciting it would be to see different species of the typical orders of aquatic insects that we are accustomed to. We were then fascinated and excited about the prospect of learning how to tie flies that resembled the very insects we had caught in the stream the same day.



One of the most engaging lessons of the trip was a lecture from Yellowstone park ranger, Harlan Kredit. He told us some of the most amazing, hilarious, and inspiring stories that we have ever heard. We were enthralled by his story of finding new geothermal features in the national park, and amazed by some of his experiences with people interacting with wild bison and grizzly bears. His remarks about the value of education and the importance of teachers was incredibly moving for both of us.

We both have background with hunting and shooting sports, and were grateful for the opportunity to sharpen our skills and learn from experienced instructors how to teach firearm safety and shooting skills. The men and women who guided us through our archery, handgun, rifle, shotgun lessons and activities were passionate about the sport and incredibly patient with us. We were excited to both become certified archery instructors through the National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP).

During our entire stay we were blown away by the dedication and expertise of the staff. They were clearly passionate about all that they shared and we are so thankful to them for sharing their time. Additionally, we feel so blessed to have connected with so many diverse educators from across North America. We have forged friendships and relationships that will endure.

Now that we are in the beginning of a new school year, it is our plan to incorporate our experiences and new knowledge into our classrooms. We are looking forward to sharing our stories and new teaching strategies with students as we teach about conservation and the environment. We plan to encourage our students in archery and fly-tying through future club initiatives. It is our hope that we can encourage other teachers in our school and our locale to participate in this amazing, enriching experience.

