

TWF Program Provides More Than 12,000 Meaningful Outdoor Experiences to Kids in Memphis and Nashville

The Tennessee Wildlife Federation is taking kids from the inner city and into the natural world through its Great Outdoors University (GOU) program in Memphis and Nashville. Over the course of six years, the program has reached a milestone by providing more than 12,000 outdoor experiences that have touched young lives in powerful ways.

“Students who are familiar with the sounds of gunshots and sirens have had positive experiences with the awesome wonder of the outdoors,” said Chan Sheppard, executive director of Preston Taylor Ministries in Nashville. “Some have said, ‘I didn’t know it could be this quiet’ and ‘Why can’t we see all of these stars from Nashville?’ It’s also been good for our staff to expose students to opportunities that we cannot provide on our own.”

Founded in 2006 by Memphis businessman and Tennessee Wildlife Federation (TWF) Board Member Peter Schutt, GOU is a collaborative approach and works with more than a dozen community partners—from the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts to city community centers and faith-based organizations—to provide life-changing outdoor programming through day, weekend and overnight trips.

Carlos Hawkins, a regional manager for residential services for Youth Villages, says that the opportunities provided to kids outside of the typical group home setting are “truly everlasting.”

“Our young people express so much excitement over participating in things like bonfires, stream strolls and scavenger hunts,” Hawkins said. “Many of the youth we serve would not typically get a chance to have these experiences if it were not for Great Outdoors University.”

In Memphis, Boy Scouts of America ScoutReach Program Manager James Moore not only sees hundreds of kids go through the program, but he participated in a trip for eight young Scouts to the Cascade Mountains in Washington State last summer. For many, it was the first time on an airplane, or out of the city.

“The GOU program offers many opportunities for youth to explore the outdoors and learn about nature. One of the primary reasons boys join and remain in Scouting is because they are able to participate in these outdoor programs,” Moore said. The ScoutReach program helps ensure that everyone has a chance to become a Scout, regardless of means.

“I can’t describe in words what that trip meant to me and to those boys,” he said. “When we were building our stamina through smaller hikes around Memphis, the kids were reciting insects and trees and rocks that we saw. The educational aspect is on a whole other level, and they want to learn. Part of Scouting is outing, but these kids got to participate in something that most Boy Scouts never get to do.”

TWF hopes to expand the award-winning program to east Tennessee in the future, and to provide a template to other affiliates of the National Wildlife Federation. A pilot program through the North Carolina Wildlife Federation was launched this year.