

Passing along Outdoor Values and Ethics

Not-for-profit uses group expertise to educate children about the outdoors



Jim 'Smitty' Smith shows children how to use a duck call at the Will County Fair.



T.E.A.C.H. Outdoors hosts four free fishing derbies per year. This fisherman had his line in at Woodsmoke Ranch outside of Seneca in 2017.



Bob Wilkins, Vice President of T.E.A.C.H. Outdoors teaches a foreign exchange student from Tokyo how to fish at Woodsmoke Ranch in Seneca.

by Allison Selk

Jim "Smitty" Smith recalled a quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln that his mother used to say to him: "No man stands so tall as when he stoops to help a child." Smith, of Morris, Illinois, has taken that quote to heart by spearheading an outdoor program for kids. In 2016, Smith and six board members began T.E.A.C.H. Outdoors, which stands for *Tradition, Education, Adventure, Conservation and Habitat*. The group's mission was to get children outside, pass along outdoor values and teach the conservation and ethics of being an outdoor person. And do it at no cost for the children.

Smith said his own love for the outdoors began when, as an eighth grader, James and Vera Smith adopted him, removing him from a tough childhood situation. Smith said his father guided him through the traditions of being an outdoorsman. "When we were out fishing, hunting, or camping we bonded. We weren't just father and son, we were buddies. He always told me that a person who could do what we were doing could always stand tall, be counted on and take care of himself and those around him," Smith said. "He said there was no use sitting in the house and being afraid of the world; go out and conquer it yourself."

Smith maintained his outdoor lifestyle with wife Kim and daughter Brittney, but with a busy work schedule, he was not out as much as he liked. When time became available, he dove back into his passion. Smith began to volunteer with local outdoor organizations, but none seemed like the perfect fit. A few years ago, Smith, his wife and friends sat in his living room and decided to use the individual knowledge of each volunteer to create T.E.A.C.H. Outdoors and serve north central Illinois.

With a \$300 budget for the first year, the team's first event was a wood duck box challenge at a Girl Scout camp in Sheridan, Illinois. With a nail gun and nesting box kits, the team made 90 houses.

"We educated the girls about wood ducks, showed them how to build a nesting box and then talked about conservation on Illinois waterways. Some girls took the boxes home and placed them on waterways, and we placed some, too," Smith said.

The second season of T.E.A.C.H. Outdoors, the group hosted a fundraiser in the spring and gained some local sponsors. With a \$6,000 budget, the group offered fishing derbies, wood duck box challenges, and campouts.

2018 has brought big changes to T.E.A.C.H. Outdoors. Smith and board vice president Bob Wilkins became Illinois Department of Natural Resources Hunter Safety Instructors. They had their first free hunter safety course in Morris in January and 40 kids attended.

Adam Akre of Pontiac, Illinois, brought his son Austin, 14, to the course so he could join in family waterfowl and deer hunts. Akre said his son loves the outdoors and had been out on hunts to observe. He sat with his son through the course and noted he learned some things about hunter safety himself. The class had an unexpected bonus.

"I listened to Smitty talk about taking people out on hunts so I thought he was a guide and was going to offer to pay him to take us out. He told us he was not a guide, but offered to take us out the next weekend. As we were setting up the decoys on the river, my son shot his first goose," Adam Akre said. "I realized I had not been waterfowl hunting in six years and this relit my fire to get out again, especially with my son."

The hunter safety courses will take place three to four times per year.

Another addition is T.E.A.C.H. Outdoors' new location in a new community center, the former Reed-Custer Primary School in Custer Park, Illinois. It opened in January.

The school building was renamed The Center and houses community-based programs. Smith said he and the board knew it was time to move indoors when they had to cancel events due to weather.

The lush grounds and access to water and hiking trails can bring the classroom outside, too.

The plans for 2018 include archery, four fishing derbies, a campout, hikes, wood duck box challenges, hunter safety courses and more environmental education about habitat, wildlife, flowers and more. The group also plans to return to the Will County Fair and to teach duck calling and archery skills there and at Community Fest at First Baptist Church in Morris.

Melissa Cavenaile (dubbed "Ranger Rick" by the group) is director of habitat education and communications. She said her great influence has been a naturalist within the Wisconsin State Park system in Door County where she and her family spent many vacations.

Cavenaile said she created her curriculum based on native species so that children could constantly watch for the animals and plants they discussed.

"This gives them something to look forward to and gets their eyes off of phones and tablets," Cavenaile said.

She has also witnessed children and adults have the "ah ha" moment when they realized nature was only minutes away from their front doors. She said parents who attend a fishing derby have been surprised that such natural areas were so close. She said the T.E.A.C.H. Outdoors team at a fishing derby can calm the fears of parents, which might be why the child had not been exposed to the outdoors yet.

"We can break down barriers and educate about nature so they can enjoy it. Most realize they can walk or ride bikes to a natural area," Cavenaile said. "First fish smiles are my favorite moment. The kids feel good about being good at something."

Smith said to kick off all of the proposed events at no cost to the families and pay for the space at The Center, T.E.A.C.H. Outdoors needs to raise \$50,000. Sponsors have come forward when the not-for-profit organization needed a trailer for storage and financial help in the past, so he said he hopes the funds will come in for the 2018 events.

On March 24 at the Loyal Order of Moose lodge in Joliet, Illinois, T.E.A.C.H. Outdoors will host its second annual banquet. Money raised through admission, raffles and live and silent auctions will go to support the mission, as well as to fund the yearly \$500 scholarship awarded a high school graduate headed for college.

"When I was a kid dinner was ready when the barn light came on," Smith said. "Times have changed and now it's time to eat when the TV gets turned off—if it gets turned off. I would like to think that kids and families could have fun outside without electronics. It builds character, independence, self thinking and courage. It gives kids a 'Yes I can' attitude." **MWO**

Rock Island Conservation Club Tourney Rescheduled



Standing in the pouring rain, Ray Bender kept on pulling out fish while standing on a slippery fallen tree.

The 2018 Rock Island Conservation Club Winter Fishing Tournament has been postponed from January 27 to March 3 due to deteriorating ice conditions.

"It is better to postpone this event, and have it as a fun, open water shoreline tournament, than have the possibility of just one accident that could turn it into a tragic event," said Troy Eacker, RICC president.

On March 3, the RICC's three lakes on Big Island Road, Milan, Illinois will hopefully host the event as an open water/shoreline fishing contest as happened in 2006, when there was a good turnout, and lots of fish caught.

All rules stay the same as if it were ice, other than anglers will be fishing from shore—not boats allowed. Terminal tackle will be anything used for ice fishing while rods and reels can be normal, open water tackle.

The entry fee is \$10 per person, with the same three categories of largest bluegill; largest crappie; and overall weight for a 10-bluegill limit.

Sponsors remain Frabill, TTI-Blakemore, Work Sharp, Mercury Marine,



The late Jim Garcia, who was the winner of the overall weight for 10 bluegills, used complete ice fishing tackle, including short rods with spinning reels.

Bill Lewis Outdoors/Rat-L-Trap, Blitz Lures, Jiffy Ice Drills, and the newest addition to the group, Custom Jigs & Spins. Custom Jigs & Spins will give jigs to every entrant as they sign up in the morning. **MWO**

For more information...

For further details and updates visit the Rock Island Conservation Club website at riccnews.com or the group's Facebook page at facebook.com/RockIslandConservationClub. The phone number is 309-787-4770.

For information...

About T.E.A.C.H. Outdoors or to order tickets to the annual banquet, visit TeachOutdoors.org or call Jim Smith at 815-341-4001. Tickets also can be purchased at B&S Firearms at 534 Bedford Road in Morris.