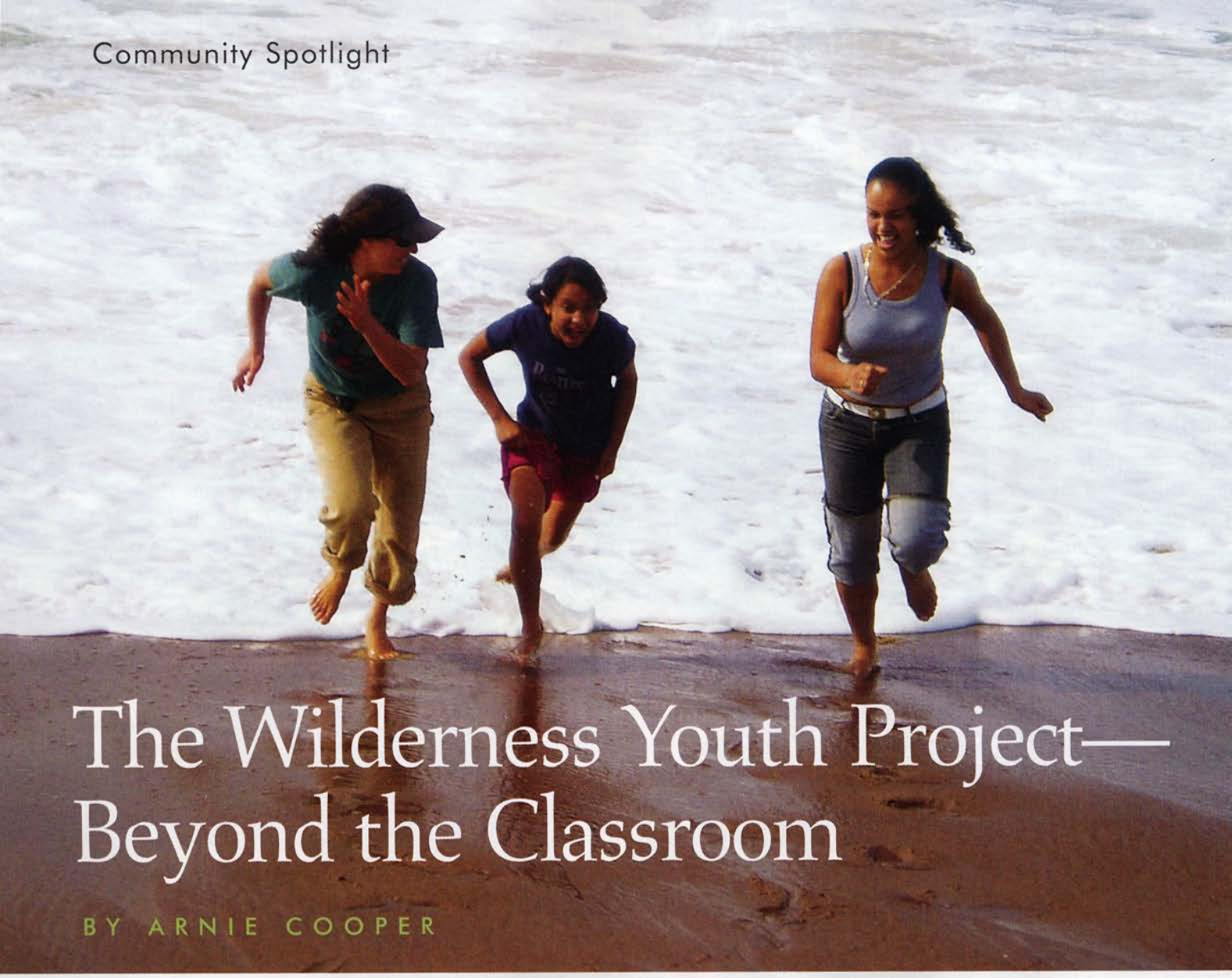

The Wilderness Youth Project—Beyond the Classroom

BY ARNIE COOPER

An afternoon of playing "sandpiper" at the beach keeps kids active and healthy.

IT'S SATURDAY MORNING, but there's no sleeping in for this group of young teens. Although they had to wake up early, they're excited. They're about to explore the Guadalupe Dunes. With no wind and only feathery clouds drifting across a sun-drenched sky, it's a perfect day for a Wilderness Youth Project (WYP) excursion.

This Santa Barbara-based non-profit is dedicated to nurturing youth, adults and families by using nature as a starting point for personal exploration and growth.

Established in 1997 by Santa Barbarans Warren Brush and Cyndi Harvan, WYP was originally an adventure program for kids. Since then, it has expanded to involve all community members through a unique curriculum that involves storytelling, confidence-building activities and primitive survival skills training—all centered on mentoring.

Mark Tollefson, who became director last year, says it is this mentoring philosophy that distinguishes WYP from other groups. Trips and projects are kept intentionally small. "We'll never have more than four kids to one counselor, which is rare for this type of program," he says.

In fact, for this particular trip, it's almost one to one, with just six kids and four counselors participating.

Charlie Coupal, who runs *Northwind Leadership*, one of WYP's after-school programs, has the group stand in a circle and begin stretching. "Look at that wave,"

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he says. "It's so amazing. And the color of the water. I'd love to hear everybody's voice this morning to bring our minds together around things we're thankful for."

Thirteen-year-old Ryan speaks up. "I appreciate the ocean," he says, after which the others, including counselors, share their thoughts. Tollefson and the group then negotiate the route for the day. The consensus: hike out through the dunes and back along the ocean.

And so, in no particular order, our little brigade starts making its way across the shifting sands. But rather than focusing on the undulating hills in front of us, almost everyone casts their eyes downward, captivated by the small tracks left in the sand.

"What do you think that is?" Coupal asks, pointing to what looks like a bike's tread marks. Tollefson says it could be a snake. Meanwhile, 13-year-old Jacob starts following a pair of tiny bird prints that appear to extend for miles in intricate crisscrossing patterns.

To those of us who never attended Tom Brown Tracker School in New Jersey as Tollefson did, the usefulness of following animal tracks may seem elusive. But "tracking," he points out, "is not just looking at lifeless depressions in the ground." To him, such in-depth observations of nature serve as metaphors that offer practical applications.

By developing sensitivity to the natural world, youths can enhance their life skills. Tollefson says that intimate contact with nature affords people a higher degree of empathy and awareness, a skill easily transferable to people. "If we can look at a little bird and tell if it's excited or in a state of relaxation, how hard is it to walk into a board room somewhere and know what's going on with every person in there?"

Indeed, in these days of iPods and XBoxes, Tollefson says one of the more serious issues affecting youth these days is what futurist author Richard Louv describes as "Nature Deficit Disorder." This has resulted in an increase in childhood obesity and Attention Deficit Disorder. However, a recent University of Illinois study found that having children spend just 30 minutes in nature each day reduced their symptoms enough to let them go off their medication.

Our meandering leads us to an area of sand canyons—the perfect spot for a group jump. Tollefson scales the mini-mountain

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The dunes are filled with treasures to be discovered, from arrowheads to animal bones.

with three of the kids, who take a running start and leap off the dune's edge.

The day progresses with more cliff jumping, playing sandpiper (running in and out of the ocean) and gathering *chert,*

The group plunges off the top of a dune into the soft sand below.

the finely grained rock used by Chumash to make arrowheads.

To the unaided eye, all this may seem haphazard, but Tollefson says he intentionally keeps the structure invisible. "With the history of hundreds of programs behind us, we know the kind of questions we're going to ask and the kinds of activities we're going to do. Children have structure constantly when they're in school. The last thing they want is more of it when they're out on a trip like this. One reason they like to come back with us is that they feel like we're just wandering, exploring."

In fact, during the final circle to finish out the day, everyone is jubilant. But 15-year-old Desiree sums it up best. "The highlight of the trip was actually coming out here and doing all the stuff that I didn't think that I could do. It was just pretty amazing." ✲

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