The Call of the Wild

Today we went to Yoda's lair! It was little and covered in leaves, but I wasn't afraid. With my new hat, I could see the truth. I had to go inside to discover what's in there.

“T” was there, sitting in the corner. He was small but had a big personality. He turned his head and looked at me. I couldn't help but feel happy to see him.

My beaming son sat on about his outdoor adventure from the backseat as I drove him home from his second day at Wilderness Youth Project (WYP). Hardly pausing to gulp a breath, he told of his friends, counselors, and how he couldn't recall some of their names. He remembered the color shirts with their wild backyard rain or shine, taking kids on explorations of Ellwood Park, Lizard's Mouth, the Santa Ynez River, and many other natural treasures, returning them back to their parents with leaves in their hair and dirt on their clothes.

The core activities WYP teaches foster awareness, thankfulness, and the art of questioning. There are few 'No's' from the counselors and instead a lot of encouragement for the children to search and discover the answers they are seeking. Youngsters are supported in their individual interests and allowed to let their curiosity run free (fully supervised of course).

After signing my son up for the one-day-a-week winter program, I reached out and got in touch with Michelle Howard, Development Director at WYP. Celebrating her 10th anniversary with the organization, Howard had nothing but positive insight as to the strength and importance of the outdoors. "I really identify with Wilderness Youth Project. It offers a beautiful opportunity for kids to connect with nature and how the WYP is able to fit into our scheduled days is really exciting. Playing outside is a child's right. Kids need to explore their physical capabilities and see what they can accomplish. It makes them much more confident." Seeing a change in my son, Henry, after only two weeks, I have to agree with everything she says and even the WYP's motto: Nature makes children smarter, happier, and healthier is a spot-on proven fact.

There is a tangible passion with the employees at Wilderness Youth Project. Many of the staff have been with the organization for almost a decade and have had the opportunity to watch children grow up into conscientious, empathetic young adults who care about their surroundings. They are a group of well-educated nature lovers who dedicate themselves to enriching the next generation.

Founded 15 years ago by Warren Brush and Cynthia Harvan, Wilderness Youth Project has become the after-school and summer program for local young children. Their popular programs continually fill up year-round and keep a running wait list should a spot become available. They have day camps for younger participants and overnight campouts for the bigger kids. They group the children into four age groups starting at three through teens; Chickadees, Grasshoppers, Young Eagles, and North Wind Leaders.

But the WYP is not just for children; it also hosts host adult campouts and workshops that focus on learning the WYP's mentoring strategies, developing outdoor skills, and refreshing your body and spirit. There are family campouts during the summer and the WYP is pleased to introduce the new Family Backcountry trip starting this May.

I'm not sure we are ready to commit to an overnight family adventure just yet, but it's getting closer as my son continuously asks, "How many more days until 'camp' day?" every day of the week.

When I pull up to the meeting grounds at Tucker's Grove and park next to the row of long white passenger vans, Henry can't wait to get out of the car and sprint to his group, the Grasshoppers. Before I can even say goodbye or handover his car seat and backpack, he has already hopped off into the surrounding bushes, joining the other children lost in play. I leave him to explore his call of the wild, knowing that he is looked after and safe.

For more information on Wilderness Youth Project, please visit their website at www.wyp.org.