UP CLOSE

BY **JACQUELYN DE LONGE**

Our former restaurant reviewer takes a closer look at the people, places, and things that make Santa Barbara so unique. This freelance writer's credits include Chef's Profile for Food & Home Magazine, repeat comedic monologues for the national play, Expressing Motherhood, and many more. If she is not writing, practicing Pilates or yoga, you can find her chasing her two kids and two dogs around Santa Barbara.

The Call of the Wild

The adventure seeking fun loving staff at Wilderness Youth Project

The dragons huddle together

There is as much play in the water as there is on land

"Today we went to Yoda's lair! It was little and covered in leaves and there was water, but he wasn't home. We had to climb through the bushes to find it and the branches were like hands with long fingers, and we went through booby traps and I broke one of them so it wouldn't get us. And I wasn't afraid. Mom, I love going to my camp (WYP)." – Henry 5.

My beaming son rattled 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 new friends and counselors, and though he couldn't recall some of their names he remembered the color shirts they were wearing. I looked as his excited mud-caked reflection in the rearview mirror and couldn't help but beam on the drive home, too. His happiness was positively contagious.

I first came across the Wilderness Youth Project last summer when I was looking for a full-time camp for my then four-year-old son and two-and-a-half-year old daughter. Since my girl was too young to attend, I did not look into their program any further and found a suitable option for the two of them. Then last month, I approached my son's teacher at the Orfalea Early Education Learning Center located off campus at SBCC and asked her opinion on local Santa Barbara after-school programs. My son thrives at school every day and has a growing curiosity and energy level that I am having trouble maintaining on my own. It seemed only logical to seek out a fresh crew that could keep up with his racing mind and body.

The first program out of her mouth was Wilderness Youth Project. It is a year-round non-profit organization that focuses on a child's deep connection to nature to foster a life-long love of learning through active outdoor experiences and mentoring. For the past 15 years, WYP has been discovering Santa Barbara's 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 or sand everywhere.

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. Youths 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 Backpacking 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 every 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 as they wait for everyone to arrive. I leave him to explore his call of the wild, knowing that he is looked after and safe. The boy I pick up a few hours later will have strengthened his sense of self and discovered his own little place in the Santa Barbara wilderness.

Wilderness Youth Project
www.wyp.org