

Things Don't Change Much At Nature's Classroom

Tom Shay is moving quickly. It's a gray Tuesday afternoon at Nature's Classroom in Thonotosassa, and the rain is ready to come down hard. The instructor has more than 30 young students on his hands, and he seems determined not to let bad weather cut their day too short.

At any moment, the school buses will come bouncing down the sand-and-gravel road to take everyone back to school. He's got just enough time.

Cut indoors to the famous Science Room. The kids have filed in fast from outside and filled the place with their chatter. Shay lifts one large ball python from its glass cage, and all stirring abruptly stops.

He's fond of this exotic, "but I prefer the natives," he tells the group as he gestures toward three rat snakes nearby. He circles the room with the python coiled around his hands, inviting students to hold the reptile if they wish.

"Me, me!" most shout as they rush in. A few others step forward bravely, then scatter like small scared mice as the snake approaches. Two or three play it safe by taking snapshots only.

Shay hands the python off to a fellow instructor as he picks up two other reptilia:



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one of the rat snakes and a baby banded water snake. He promptly recruits me to pass around the latter.

While the kids mob me and my new snake-friend ("His belly is so soft! Look at his tiny tongue!" they marvel), Shay goes after one of the baby alligators for a grand finale. Various toads, frogs and lizards look on as one brave young man volunteers to hold the gator first. All others hold their breath.

I am in sixth grade all over again.

Situated upon 365 undeveloped acres along the Hillsborough River, Nature's Classroom might just be the best reason to attend public schools in Hillsborough County. Each year since 1969, the district's sixth-graders have come to northeast Tampa for three days to study the river and its ecosystem up close. Computers, textbooks and air



Photo by AVERY DEFILIPPIS

Since 1969, Nature's Classroom has provided educational programs about animals and the ecosystem to sixth-graders in Hillsborough County public schools. Exotic animals such as this white skunk offer students interesting hands-on lessons.

conditioning are traded for cabbage palm, longleaf pine and the hope of seeing something wild on the trail.

It is this hope – combined with a nostalgic streak – that has brought me back to the spot I loved 17 years ago. I have wanted to come back ever since budget cuts 10 years ago almost closed the program for good.

Plus, I've heard that a new aviary houses my favorites – the barred owl, the great horned owl and other birds of prey. I have a vague recollection of an otter taking a nibble out of one instructor's finger. I want to find out if it

really happened or if it's the stuff of sixth-grader imagination.

Karen Johnson-Folsom, the program's site coordinator and lead teacher, has somehow made time for my pipe dream.

To a sixth-grader, it seems as if Nature's Classroom runs itself. But to see the place as an adult makes all its intricacies become clear.

The staff here is a small, seasoned group.

"Most of us have been here for years," explains Johnson-Folsom in her tiny office, where she handles phone calls, writes grant proposals

and manages the program.

The program's limited budget makes for a limited number of staff members, so background and training are key. By August this year, all staff will have completed their Florida master naturalist certification.

"The strength of this staff is shown by their willingness to do things you wouldn't be asked to do at a normal school site. One of our custodians will handle the animals, our bus drivers operate our boats, and a teacher might run the entire program. That's why we feel so strongly about the training."

Dressed in blue jeans and hiking boots, Johnson-Folsom embodies this versatility herself. On the trail she's clearly at home, leading about 25 students and me through pine flatwoods and humid hammocks.

She crouches at the burrow of a gopher tortoise while her attentive audience looks closely and quietly. Further along the hike, one sharp-eyed student spots a small turtle on the trail. Johnson-Folsom points to the leech on its shell. This indicates it spends time in the water, unlike the gopher tortoise.

"Probably a musk or mud turtle," she surmises.

At the end of the trail, the

students find their big yellow buses waiting for them. As they leave, the place grows quiet. I get a chance to talk shop with Bill Munsey, a teacher who has been with the program for 34 years – almost since its inception.

We try to nail down all that makes the place different from any other. With all that has changed in area schools since then, Munsey believes that Nature's Classroom is "the one tradition in Hillsborough County that every [public schooler] shares."

It's true. Everyone remembers the Snake Who Ate Himself or the five-legged alligator, or performing shoreline river sampling with friends.

And some of us have a persistent memory of an otter giving an instructor a little nip. I have to ask Munsey if he knows about this one.

He flashes a big grin and shows me a small scar on the ring finger of his right hand.

I knew it was no fiction!

I could see he was proud of that scar.

I would be too.

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