

My Life as an Edventurer

By Sandy Wilkes

I started my training in adventure education around 1986 when Mike Laurence introduced the concept to Brock University. At the time, I was employed by Niagara College working in its Futures Program. The "heads of state" thought it would be a good idea to apply Project Adventure's adventure-based counselling paradigm when working with at-risk clientele. The idea was a good one. A number of us risk-taking types volunteered to participate in the train-the-trainer session facilitated by Jim Schoel. To me the theory behind adventure-based programs seemed a coalescence of my yen for sociology, psychology, existential philosophy and physical and health education. Over the next two years, I was able to facilitate a number of youth groups in adventure education and always enjoyed it.

I left Niagara College to pursue a teaching career with the Lincoln County Board of Education. By September 1989, I was posted to South Lincoln High School in Smithville, Ontario. Here I met a physical education colleague, Andrew Yap, who loved to listen to my ideas surrounding the potential of adventure programming. With financial assistance from the board's physical education consultant, Harvie Hagerty, Andrew and I participated in a number of Project Adventure workshops, including Advanced Adventure Based Counselling. At South Lincoln we developed a specialty course called Adventure Based Education. The credit course was a quasi-physical education course offered under the auspices of the special education department. Andrew and I volunteered many hours writing curriculum and developing and delivering the program, as well as constructing low ropes initiatives out behind the school. At one point, we had 21 different initiatives available to our students.

In addition to the course work here at school, Andrew and I instigated an annual four-day adventure based leadership program for our student council. Our accessibility to Cave Springs Camp allowed us the opportunity

to not only use low ropes but high ropes as well. For grade 12 physical education students we developed a special one-week adventure based program that was held at Bark Lake. Ironically, we were doing adventure programming at Bark Lake before it was a Project Adventure training site. We continued to use Bark Lake to the day of its closure as a provincial government facility.

Each of the various adventure programs provided worthwhile experiences for staff and students alike, but it was only at Bark Lake and Cave Springs that we could offer our students the pinnacle of the adventure wave — the high ropes experience — where our youth could really test themselves. Nonetheless, adventure programming was the cornerstone of our physical and health education courses here at South Lincoln.

In 1998, our school was finally approved for our long-awaited addition. A major component of this addition was a new, full-sized gymnasium. As the new Head of Physical Education, I had the opportunity to provide input into the design of the new facility. My first request was to include a climbing wall. After consulting with Brian Lisson of Adventureworks! Associates, Inc., his meeting with the architects, and the support of then-principal Pete Mitchell, the new District School Board of Niagara approved my request. The plan was to develop four routes, all with interchangeable holds. The wall would allow us to add a meaningful culminating activity to the two- to three-week adventure education unit implemented at the beginning of every semester for every grade.

The adventure based curriculum in general, and the climbing wall in particular, offer our students the opportunity to explore such concepts as physical and emotional safety, self-esteem, trust building, goal setting, positive risk taking, community building, problem solving and decision making. All the aforementioned are essential concepts

underpinning any worthwhile educational experience. With regard to the Ministry of Education's health and physical education guidelines, our climbing wall activities meet very specific criteria with regard to the overall expectations in the strand of physical activity: "Demonstrate competence in applying movement skills and principles" and "apply their knowledge of guidelines and strategies that can enhance their participation in recreational and sports activities." (One of our original students, William Meinen, became a world-class rock climber after his start here at South Lincoln.) In the strand of active living, students "demonstrate improved physical fitness" and "demonstrate responsibility for their safety and the safety of others." Finally, in the strand of Living Skills, students "use decision-making and goal-setting skills to promote healthy active living" and "demonstrate the social skills required to work effectively in groups and develop positive relationships with their peers."

An integral component of our program is choosing 12 grade ten students who demonstrate the physical, mental and emotional skills required to be a caring and responsible belayer in the grade nine physical education class. These students participate in a 20-hour workshop delivered by trainers from Adventureworks! Associates, Inc. that covers many of the major tenets of the climbing wall instructor course. Typically, they learn how to set up climbing routes that are challenging but not overwhelming, knots, climbing wall physics, belaying techniques, climbing wall safety, care and inspection of climbing equipment, climbing wall communication skills, and climbing and facilitation techniques.

Our grade nine and ten climbing wall unit is four days in duration. During day one, the student belayers teach their peers how to put on the seat and chest harnesses making sure that all aspects of safety are very closely observed. The second half of this first class is spent explaining negative and positive holds, reviewing safe practices while on the wall, and introducing climbing techniques. The student belayers then instruct the

students in several bouldering exercises emphasizing spotting techniques and the communication sequence. The next three days are spent principally on climbing with the student belayers using the technical and facilitation skills they learned during their training workshop. The belayers must also teach non-climbing students how to "anchor" the belayer; "smile" as back-up belayer and "bag" the rope.

There are as many benefits to being a student belayer as there are individuals who belay. Probably the most important benefit to the students is the opportunity to learn, practice and hone leadership skills. I have had many of my belayers ask me to be a reference for them when they are applying for part-time employment, college or even university. Their esteem needs are met by the recognition they receive from students and staff alike. We often call upon these students to help with various clubs in the school and in the community. The student belayers also get to understand and appreciate a little more of the teaching profession.

My role in the adventure process at South Lincoln is multi-faceted. In consultation with our special education resource teacher, I recruit the selected students at the end of their grade nine year. I arrange for Adventureworks! to come to our school for a September weekend in order to train our belay team. During training, I act as host, making sure the logistics of facilities, equipment and lunch are all organized. As a result of my years of experience, I am also able to provide the students with feedback on their skills while they are in training. Most importantly, I schedule the climbing wall days and organize my belayers to minimize their loss of class time. Finally, I am the last "check" before climber and belayer are off on their symbiotic relationship of triumph. I personally debrief each student once they have made their attempt at climbing the wall. Some climbers come off the wall in tears of elation; others come off with the widest possible grins. Still others come off asking if they could try it blindfolded. Always, I try to make the climber realize the accomplishment

of their "going for the perfect try." Often I am able to use the paradigm of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey to help climbers understand how the climb is very much an analogy of life with its triumphs and tragedies, its helpers and villains, and that, ultimately, the most important thing is the courage of the individual to take the risk and overcome fears.

In the past, we have had a number of elementary and secondary schools in our school board come to South Lincoln to experience the climbing wall firsthand. During our grade eight open house we have the climbing wall set up in hopes of encouraging students to come to South Lincoln to experience the unique physical education opportunity our climbing wall presents. It works! Our hope for the future is to acquire funding to expand our bouldering facility. In the meantime, our climbing wall has been more than a worthwhile adjunct to our health and physical education program here at South Lincoln High School.

Sandy Wilkes has taught at South Lincoln High School in Smithville, Ontario since 1989. He is the father of four beautiful children including natural triplets.

