

Following Mike's Blazes: Thoughts from the CELP and Headwaters Trail

By Janet Dalziel and Katie Gad



The students are out on solo, and as we sit here in the winter tent, flames from good hardwood dance in the stove and the kettle shakes to a boil. Looking around us, we recognize the things that Mike loved and take stock of all we have learned in teaching with him. "This is gold," Mike said, when he first saw the potential of winter camping for students. It was a perfect example of his visionary capacity to formulate program. Teaching students to swing an axe for the first time or sing a song around the fire, watching connection to nature form and deepen, self-confidence grow, and the group bond were all "gold" to Mike. His energy and love of sharing these experiences was big. He had a largeness of heart and a generosity of spirit that was remarkable. He was a constant mentor, so often at the side of a student or co-worker affirming, "Ah, great bannock" or "Just look at that sled fly!" He shared his enthusiasm for the simple and durable old technologies of canoe, snowshoe, wool and axe. His corrections were gentle and often humorous: "That wood pile could be just a little higher . . . so two short guys could shake hands over it." His presence is felt in these refrains and in this place as much as his absence.

In his 14 years teaching the Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP) and Headwaters, over 500 students have passed through these programs. Mike wove together outdoor education, environmental

education, place-based education, and praxis, amongst other pedagogies. His design of programs was brilliant: it was almost as if he looked at the teenage world and the environmental crises they would be faced with and asked "What will they need to feel, know and do in order to be leaders tomorrow?" Answers were to be found in the experiences he offered, and although he never forced lessons, time and again students came away in awe of the natural world, feeling a stronger sense of self and community, experiencing a new awareness of environmental issues, and possessing a host of new skills.

Mike had a keen, intuitive sense of the educational potential that lay at the heart of certain activities. Recognizing a new possibility, he would launch a new project with enthusiasm and an experimental sense of adventure. In Headwaters, Mike explored the potential of "local food" with his students. Tracking the number of kilometres that food traveled before becoming part of a meal, students learned the meaning of a "locavore lunch." He decided that "local" should include "on-site" and an organic garden at Headwaters followed. The garden demanded manure and as he was on a "permaculture" kick, Mike built a chicken coop — purely for the poop! (The eggs, he realized, were an added bonus.) As he might have said, "Ah, chickens! Fertile ground for learning as well as for tomatoes." A typical "Elrick moment"

September 17, 2000 — Magnetewan River, Fall CELP trip. Just above Thirty Dollar Rapid on the upstream rapid campsite. Another glorious fall day. Absolutely clear sky and mist rising from the water. Fall tripping does not get much finer. Morning fire, coffee a brew. Got up with the morning star and saw Orion's belt low in the horizon at 4 am; winter time is coming. The (Bill Mason) tent, the tent, the tent is allowing that to happen. The views keep me in touch with what I am here for: the view, the stars, the storms, the sunrises. Ah . . . the tent.

ensued on “chicken transfer day,” when the principal made an announcement over the PA system to request that, “the staff member who left chickens in the staff room please remove them immediately.” The chickens were transported to the site that day on the school bus — one of the many contributions of our CELP bus driver, Darryl. June of 2009 saw the locavore theme catch up with Mike as he found himself forced to live without coffee, having pledged, along with his students, to follow a 100-mile diet for a two-week period. This was really taking education to “the next level” as Mike called it.

With a keen eye for the potential of experiences to nurture and expand spirit, Mike worked into the program ceremonies or rituals missing from our broader culture: a tea ceremony for appreciating a place; a balsam ceremony to induct students as travelers of the winter trail; the making of paddles, carved by students out of wood harvested from the property, earned as a symbol of accomplishing the solo. These in turn would become the stuff of stories to teach from. Mike was always sharing stories of the past, of himself, and of his students that seemed to carry a weight of meaning and spirit. His own connection to the land and the stories that went with it poured out of him — he invited you into the story to take from it whatever seemed to fit.

Somehow, Mike also managed to find time in his years of building wanigans, learning about maple syrup production, and managing the Earthkeeper program to chair, for eight years, a boardwide Environmental Issues Committee, sit on the Centennial field trip

committee, coach volleyball, and help half a dozen other integrated programs across the province with their start up. He was generous with his time and unfailingly supportive in his mentorship of colleagues and numerous student teachers. He practiced what he preached, and in doing so inspired students and staff alike. On rainy days his yellow rain slicker would form a puddle on the school floor as he removed his bike helmet and declared with a grin, “It’s a beaut out there today!” before he headed to the office to join the espresso club. His presence was always positive. Community formed around Mike: he didn’t build it forcefully; he simply, always, made the space for it to emerge.

As we continue Mike’s work and begin making it our own, we find ourselves supported by the network he created of volunteers and resource people. His neighbour came in last week to teach our grade 12’s how to make moccasins. Our bus driver has arranged our tree planting dates. Mike’s snow walker friends are camped just down the marsh from us, having cleared the trails ahead and made sure that we have “good wood.” With help we will continue to pass the essence of Mike’s stories on and help students to find their own stories. Mike always encouraged each of us to find our own path, but his mentorship and the blazes he has left to help us along on our journey are an invaluable gift that we will always be grateful for.

Janet Dalziel and Katie Gad teach CELP and Headwaters in Guelph. More information on the programs can be found at www.celp.info