

A Day of Firsts for Edge High School Students

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



On November 12, 13 students from EDGE Charter High School participated in their first outing with the Seeds of Stewardship program. The day began with many introductions. Tina, a ranger from Saguaro National Park, came for the first half-hour to present the students with information about the saguaro survey they would be completing the following week. Her presentation encouraged deeper thought about the landscape that we would visit for our first outing.



EDGE students on the AZT!

Once the presentation ended, trip co-leader Matthew "Pnut" Laney and I met this new group of adventurers and we headed out with them to the Gabe Zimmerman Trailhead.

Upon arrival we dove into Leave No Trace Ethics, yet another introduction for many of the students. We formed seven groups, each group responsible for remembering one of the LNT principles. Each group shared their principle with the whole, and agreed to follow them. After a round of high-fives,

courtesy of Pnut, we made our stop at the map to practice the first principle: Plan Ahead and Prepare. Many of the students had never heard of the Arizona Trail, and were out for the first hike of their lives.

Their teacher, Emily Gindlesparger, had joked with them about their cell phones not having reception where we were heading, so a few of the took pictures of the map on their phones. All of them agreed that without them they would not be able to find their way back to Tucson. We headed north, cutting across Marsh Station Road where students got their first view of Cienega Creek in its autumn glory. For those who had hardly ever been outside of urban environments this first glimpse of the creek was wondrous. We stayed above the creek bed, making our way along ridges and crossing sandy *arroyos*. There was so much to see and learn about, like the ocotillo, the smell produced by creosote, the edible prickly pear pads and their long gone fruit.

When we came upon a fishhook barrel cactus with ripe yellow fruits on top, Pnut plucked a fruit off the top and offered the students samples. Breay, one of the seniors in the group, jumped quickly at the opportunity to try something totally foreign to her palate. Others were more reluctant, but as we sat down a little later to snack and reflect on our experiences of the hike thus far, trying barrel cactus fruit was high on most students' lists.



Pnut teaches students how to choose a ripe barrel cactus fruit.

After the snack we turned around, making it an out-and-back hike, because we were eager to get down to the creek before we had to leave. We scrambled down one of the cleared sloping paths crossing the train tracks. One student, Jasmine, got a thorn embedded in her shin on her way down. Most of the students headed off to enjoy the creek and give Jasmine and the first aid extrication team some space. She handled the whole experience with the grace of a champ. After a 20-minute process we removed the thorn, and she took pictures with her phone to show her friends.



Seth leads the way with Michael close behind.

All too soon it was time to leave the beauty of the creek and the climbing gym of the rocky slopes to return to school. One student, Seth, had been quiet most of the hike, but it was clear that he had been deeply enjoying being in such a beautiful place. I asked him if when he thought he might have time to return to this spot to spend more time. “Probably not for another 20 years” he said. “What would stop you from coming sooner?” I asked. He told me that as a 19-year-old trying to graduate from high school, working, without a car, and that he just had no time

or way to get out. In this moment I was reminded of the benefits of being in nature that so many of us take for granted. I encouraged him gently to think of ways that he might be able to return sooner, maybe inviting a friend on a weekend to join him, or bringing someone out to picnic. For students who don’t have experience getting outdoors the pathways, both physical, and psychological, for getting out of the city presents many hurdles. Hopefully after a year of Seeds of Stewardship outings, some of the obstacles for getting reverent stewards like Seth outside will be fewer.



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