



Andrada Students Engage All Their Senses

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz

On December 6, 8 students from Andrada Polytechnic High School headed out to hike a segment of the Arizona Trail near the Gabe Zimmerman Trailhead. "I used to come hang out here all the time. This is basically my back yard!" Tyler, a senior, told his peers in the parking lot. It was a first time destination for most of the rest of the students who live in the Arizona Trail gateway communities of Vail and Sahuarita. The Andrada Hiking Club and STEM club are joining forces to participate in Seeds of Stewardship outings, with participation from Hiking Club leader and chemistry teacher Liz Werner.



Andrada students prepare to hit the trail.

It was a windy day, and we were hanging onto our hats for the first part of the hike, which took us south along the ridge overlooking the *arroyo*. For a stretch of desert that appears at first glance to be mainly creosote and ocotillo we found incredible diversity. We first came across the only saguaro visible in the whole stretch of landscape, safely tucked beneath its nurse plant. It has managed to reach what looks to be at least 15 years under this protective mesquite tree, in an area where no other saguaros grow. The youth took guesses about what kinds of

counterparts from taking hold, including exposure to frost.

Next, we had an experience of desert degustation as we came across a fruiting desert hackberry and sampled the sweet berries, and then a barrel cactus, where students tried the fruit and seeds. After a few more stops to marvel at agave, and Christmas cholla (*Cylindropuntia leptocaulis*), we crossed under the highway found our way into Davidson Canyon. A startled red-tailed hawk flew out of the mesquite *bosque* and took to the windy sky seeming to enjoy the breeze much more than us.

There were still many yellow leaves rustling on the cottonwoods when we got to our lunch spot near Cienega Creek. The area garnered its usual amazement, "This looks like somewhere in the Midwest!" said Hatley. We spent the next hour enjoying the area, exploring the rocks and up and down stream. Before we left the area we gathered to do a final activity. In this group the students spend most of their week in a classroom trying to focus their brain power on one specific task in front of them, and to filter out distracting noises, smells and stimulus.



Tyler and Ellie enjoy a snack in the wash.

They were asked to broaden the lens and engage every sense besides their sight, adding dimensions of awareness to their experience. Everyone picked a spot to sit and close their eyes while listening, smelling and feeling their surroundings for two minutes. We came together as a group to share our observations, and every student had something positive to say about the experience.

Nathan shared that he began to notice all the different directions the breeze was coming from because he could feel it hitting different sides of his body. Ellie said she sat and enjoyed the feeling of the sunlight on her skin. As we were heading back to the parking lot the students kept sharing their enthusiasm for experiencing the outdoors in this new way. Now that they know how, they can make a habit of engaging their other senses on future outings.



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