

## The Wonders of Snow in the Desert

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



**Fully embracing the winter hiking experience.**

On January 9, 2016, 10 students from the Andrada Polytechnic High School Hiking Club, along with Mrs. Werner, the student's chemistry teacher, decided to take an adventure to snow-covered Madera Canyon. With bundled excitement, we met at the Vail campus before making our way to a dazzling white forest.

Given that snow is not common in the Sonoran Desert, one of our main objectives, besides enjoying a hike in the snow, was to keep our feet dry. In the parking lot some students added a waterproof layer of plastic bags between their socks and shoes. This trick saved at least their feet from getting wet and cold, though it soon became apparent that there was much more to keep dry than just feet!

We began our ascent at the Vault Mine Trailhead. This was the first time in the snow for many of these new hikers, so not a second was wasted before balls of fluff were flying through the air. Five minutes in, Colt was already down and covered in a cool blanket of white. Despite a boot zipper mishap (thank goodness for the plastic bags!) and a generally damp group of youth, we kept moving up.

Experienced outdoor educators know that one of the most important things to bring along on a winter hike with youth is hot chocolate, so when we reached a safe spot for lunch the camp stove emerged. It was an ideal opportunity to teach youth how to safely operate a propane-butane stove. By this time the warm sun was well overhead, as was the sound of drips and splats of melting snow landing on our heads. The group decided to check in and gage whether we should continue moving up or if we should turn around. Largely due to wet feet and the high level of snowy cold wetness, it was decided that heading back was a good idea.



**Snacking and waiting for water to boil**

Nearing the end of our hike we paused to do a five senses activity. After two minutes in silence, what did they notice? Was it the beauty of the snowy pines on the ridge? The warmth of the sun? The cold of the snow? Or that they could hear the laughter of children playing down below? We concluded that it was the combination of all these moments that made our outing unique and magical.

As a final activity we walked down to the gift shop where we watched Mexican blue jays and hummingbirds out in full force. Mrs. Werner remarked how much she enjoyed watching this

group of students connecting with one another. It was encouraging to watch everyone explore new ways to relate. Learning outside the classroom is very valuable since half of the students have IEPs (Individualized Educational Programs), which means they may struggle academically or socially at school. Finding unexpected commonalities and unforeseen strengths can showcase their value and abilities. Nature can do wonders, inside and out.



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