

Interest growing for new forest school

SUE TIFFIN

Staff Reporter

When Cheryl Hamilton talks about why she pursued the idea of a forest school in Haliburton County, she quotes inspirational speaker Alexander den Heijer: “when a flower doesn’t bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.”

For Hamilton that concept has meant committing to driving four hours daily for one of her children, who had been struggling to learn within the current school system but was thriving at an alternative education centre in Gravenhurst.

“Having a background in childcare and working in children’s mental health for the past 15 years, I know the importance of outdoor education and hands-on learning on both a professional and personal level,” Hamilton said. “The question that I’ve always pondered is, why doesn’t our county offer this type of program ... and that’s what led me on this journey.”

Hamilton approached Irene Heaven and Heather Reid at Abbey Gardens last fall, and then Debbie Ray-Val, who together with husband Carlin operate five forest schools in Ontario, about bringing a forest school to Haliburton.

“We thought it was best to partner with a program that has deep roots and expertise, specifically in Forest School,” said Hamilton. “More than ever, there is a need for this opportunity for our community ... Giving children the opportunity to spend their days outdoors immersed in nature opens up the door to so many unique experiences and I can’t wait to see Forest School flourish in Haliburton County.”

Within about 48 hours of At Last Forest Schools announcing online the opening of a forest school in Haliburton County this upcoming fall, more than 150 interested people had joined a Facebook group looking for more information.

Ray-Val said she was thrilled to be able to bring a forest school to the area in which she grew up.

“Growing up in Haliburton and the reason why I have such a strong pull to bring this program there is that it provided me with just this incredible childhood where I’d be out by myself, and whether I was as far away from the house as I thought I was, but it was a unique feeling to be alone and self-sufficient and be able to be me and sing at the top of my lungs or look under rocks or whatever it was that I wanted to do in that moment, that putter time to develop my soul. I don’t know how much kids get that anymore,” she said.

Ray-Val met Carlin at teachers’ college in Thunder Bay, where they studied outdoor environmental ecological education. Soon after their daughter was born, they found themselves touring schools in Europe, looking at what supported and provided the best education for kids. The same school systems in which kids were thriving were also engaging students for much of their school day outside.

“It was fuel for the fire, just telling us we had to do this, we had to provide this,” said Ray-Val.

Back home in Owen Sound, they began holding information sessions sharing with the community what they wanted to offer, an outdoor school that followed a philosophy of Forest Schools, which have been around since the 1950s: repeated and regular access to the outdoors, small groups of children of varied ages with a certified teacher, inquiry-based play, the opportunity for risky play.

Ray-Val said she and Carlin dreamed of having 12 kids in the school, but at registration time in June – with parents stay-



Students enrolled in forest school explore outdoors, learning while immersed in nature. / Submitted by At Last Forest Schools



ing up until midnight to be first in line to register a spot – more than 30 kids had signed up, and by September 2016 when the school opened its doors, more than 50.

“We were like, OK, people agree with us, this is really needed,” said Ray-Val.

At Last Forest Schools are now open in Owen Sound, Kincardine, Saugeen Shores, Saugeen Valley, while a Forest/Farm hybrid school runs in Allenford.

Meanwhile, friends in Haliburton County who had been following Ray-Val’s career were sending messages: “We’re following you, we see what you’re doing, and we want it here.”

In September, At Last Forest Schools will offer a year-round program twice a

week and on PA Days, available to home schooled kids or kids who might spend half of the week at forest school and half of the week at their public school. School days are relaxed, without stress of rigid schedules.

“There’s no hard bell, there’s no, ding ding, it’s 9 a.m., switch your mind off and switch into this,” said Ray-Val. “It’s very fluent and very open and it makes for a relaxed atmosphere for kids who can be triggered by different things or who have anxiety.”

Though teachers are Ontario-certified and knowledgeable about the provincial curriculum, they don’t necessarily follow it as is typical at forest school,

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— Debbie Ray-Val
Co-founder, At Last Forest Schools

instead following the interest of the students as they explore their environment, sometimes learning about five subjects at a time depending on what they’ve discovered outdoors.

“All day long they’re counting sticks, they’re reading field guides, they’re thinking of the history or geography of an area,” said Ray-Val. “They’re constantly learning about the curriculum.”

Ray-Val said that kids and parents have reported increased interest in learning, stronger resiliency, in making connections and fostering relationships and in improved confidence. Some students in their program are attending based on their school’s recommendation, and many of the students who attend are teachers’ kids, according to Ray-Val.

Students who might have significant challenges at traditional school have been quite successful at forest school, she said, often bringing that success back to public school if they return.

“They come and find their groove and they’re totally fine,” she said. “We have the least amount of issues at forest school that you can imagine. I’m sure it’s the environment. You’re feeling a little anxiety, you’re feeling a little angry, you have all the space in the world to remove yourself and take some deep breaths and nobody’s going to hound you to deal with it right then and there in a small, confined space.”

Parents are also welcome to volunteer or to join their kids during the day, if they are able to do so.

“Parents will ask, can I come? Yes, please! If we can impact parents, that’s going to impact the kids even more. If the kids can watch their parents value nature, then they’re going to value it more and they’re going to get more out of the program,” said Ray-Val.

She notes that some parents will send their kids because they understand the importance of being outside, though they might not be able to encourage it themselves, but that everyone in some way has a connection to and understanding of the importance of nature in our lives, and that recent research suggesting that “being outside makes for a healthy, happy body and mind and spirit” has been helpful for their mission.

“Now that we’ve seen so many incredible transformations in children and families and had all these incredible testimonials, and been able to provide support for the schools, we never could have imagined how beneficial it could have been,” said Ray-Val of the program.

For more information about At Last Forest Schools – Haliburton, visit atlastforestschools.com or join At Last Forest Schools – Haliburton on Facebook. Online Q&A sessions will be held via the school’s Facebook page on Feb. 13 and May 20 at 8:30 p.m. while an in-person parent information session will be held at Abbey Gardens on April 5 at 1 p.m.

(A Forest School at Camp Wanakita will also open this fall. Read more about it in next week’s *Echo*.)