

Adventurous program helps young students  
get in touch with the power of nature

# Classroom in the wild

By KATHERINE DEDYNA  
Times Colonist staff

Until recently, Bayside Middle School vice-principal Wendy MacDonald thought she had pretty well figured out the early adolescent mindset. Outdoor experiences for kids through Power To Be Adventure Therapy Society of Sidney proved her wrong.

"We did a three-day, two-night hike of the Kludahk Trail and I learned more about pre-adolescents in 72 hours than I would probably learn in five years," she says.

It's a major way for kids to shine outside classroom walls that leads to improvement within.

Now MacDonald is keen to see how Power To Be's newly launched weekend wilderness school will build on that.

Tomorrow and Sunday will find 20 Grade 8 students from several schools, including Bayside, literally on the ropes at the Metchosin camp of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Victoria.

Ten girls and 10 boys will be figuring out how to handle healthy risk-taking, work as a team and challenge their untapped ingenuity. Never mind computer mazes: Try getting every kid to crawl through a spider web of rope without touching it or else try until they do. And they're on their own to make it happen.

"They are all super pumped for it," says school intake co-ordinator Carley Julien, 24. "That's probably our number 1 requirement — that the kids want to be there."

Some kids have no experience in the wild; others like it but find it hard to get out there. But for all of them, the aim is the same: connecting students who would benefit from the power of nature with positive role models who will help them build on their strengths.

The wilderness school is "the first of its kind in B.C.," as far as Tim Cormode can tell. The 37-year-old executive director of Power To Be raises "an average of \$5,000 per kid" to make it happen.

This year, these 20 youths will spend one weekend per month outdoors and one week in the summer. They'll take on nature challenges from French Beach to the Sooke Potholes, learning skills such as coping with getting lost in the woods or getting back on board when their kayak overturns. It's the kind of competence that can build confidence and cohesion.

"There are no distractions," says wilderness curriculum co-ordinator Ben Geselbracht. "You're just working together on the things that are most important for people — food, water, warmth and companionship."

Team exercises will promote leader-



Tim Cormode of Power To Be says he works at fundraising because government funding can be inconsistent, and consistency counts in any program for young people.

Darren Stone/Times Colonist

ship, communication, respect, cultural diversity and outdoor vocational skills such as CPR.

By 2010, the wilderness school will be fully enrolled with 80 youths, Cormode predicts. "The purpose of the program ... is to provide long-term opportunity for vulnerable youth in the school system. So that four years from now, they will have opportunities to be leaders in their community, stewards to their environment and be able to live healthier, sustainable lifestyles."

Power To Be capitalizes on the power of nature with a boost from positive peers and role models to take on everything from struggles in traditional schools to problems at home or just realizing potential rather than succumbing to modern temptations.

Guidance in the wild is not something kids can provide for themselves.

Dan Scott, now 16, recalls his Power To Be experiences as helpful in pushing his personal boundaries with hard work and teamwork, helping him realize his own leadership potential. He took part in ropes courses and surf expeditions in the Discovery program that was the predecessor to the wilderness school and continues to help with Power to Be.



Dan Scott and Chris Dickinson, on a ropes course on Hornby Island, had an opportunity to learn by taking risks.

Handout photo

"It's a real feel-good group there," says Scott's mentor and friend Chris Dickinson, 30. "They really help people along."

It's crucial for educators to work with partners in the community to maximize potential for students, MacDonald says.

"I think we're naive to think that we

can do this on our own ... we have that moral purpose and obligation to connect with people like Power to Be. They're not in it for any reason but to make a difference in a kid's life," she says. "They're passionate about it and they're gifted in working with pre-adolescents."

## JUST THE FACTS

Want to pass your love of nature adventure to a youth whose life could benefit from going wild? Consider donating \$100 to sponsor a 'day in the wilderness' allowing a youngster to push their limits while learning about outdoor life and their inner resources.

**Sponsor:** Sidney-based Power To Be Adventure Therapy Society, which has provided outdoor experiences from kayaking to camping for 1,500 youth and families since 1998.

**Budget:** From \$20,000 eight years ago to \$560,000 this year — primarily raised from private sources.

**Last year:** Raised \$410,000 from private sources and collected \$80,000 in service fees from participants who could afford it. But no child turned away.

**Number of families served in 2006:** about 400, including 150 in Victoria whose kids have a disability.

**Founder:** Tim Cormode, 37, who began working with kids with disabilities at age 16.

**Motivation:** Cormode found attending mountaineering school changed his entire approach to life.

**Power To Be Slogan:** Adventures in Nature; Learning in Life.

**Range of activities:** Sea kayaking, skiing at Mount Washington, camping, rock climbing, CPR.

**Number of staff:** Four full-time people, three part-timers plus four summer and practicum students.

**Number of volunteers:** 65

**Major supporters for multi-year programs:** TD Canada Trust, Goldcorp, R. Howard Webster Foundation and Telus.

**Anonymous donors:** Many, including one who gives \$5,000 a year to send kids living with cancer on a five-day wilderness trip — this year they go to Clayoquot Sound.

**Why private funding is sought:** "Mandates change in the government every year and if we're going to commit to four years of some kid's life, we want to make sure we've got the proper funding to back it up," says Cormode. While funding of \$163,000 from the B.C. Ministry of Children and Families laid the groundwork for the school, the province no longer provides funding.

**How to reach Power To Be:** Phone 656-0166 or visit [www.powertobe.ca](http://www.powertobe.ca) or e-mail [info@powertobe.ca](mailto:info@powertobe.ca)

## ISLAND LIVES

# Pipe major led band to marching glory

By KATHERINE DEDYNA  
Times Colonist staff

In her bright Buchanan tartan, Nancy Baker was most definitely a girl with a skirl — her beloved bagpipes resonating her presence near and far.

The first woman ever to play the lament at Victoria's cenotaph — Remembrance Day 1943 — she paraded on many happier days on main streets and in stadiums up and down the West Coast as pipe major of Victoria Girls Pipe Band.

She won many a medal for her Highland music and dance, and she won the heart of her husband, Keith, almost from the moment they met on New Year's Eve in 1949.

"Don't call her a bagpiper — she used to hate it," he says.

Keith's "beautiful lady" died in hospital Feb. 27 of pneumonia — something she had suffered several times before — at age 78.

"She threw us a kiss when we were leaving — at that point she was her old self," he recalls. But she didn't make it through the night. "It was quite a shock."

Mother of Mark and Debra, grandmother of Colan and Courtney, Nancy was a world traveller, avid golfer, long-time secretary at Royal Jubilee Hospital and still a friend to other girls in the long-defunct band who mourn her now.

She was born Annie Margaret Chalmers in Fort Frances, Ont. in 1928, but nobody ever called her anything but Nancy. Even her parents. They were immigrants of Scottish and Welsh descent

who ran restaurants at CN Railway rest stops. When Nancy was three, the family moved to Victoria due her father's rheumatoid arthritis.

At 12, she took up the bagpipes with Donald MacLean and by age 16 was pipe major — leading 20 girls who did Victoria proud as far as the Portland Rose Festival. Her father managed the band, which during the Second World War put on more than 150 concerts for the troops. Once they even piped on the deck of a British aircraft carrier in dry-dock in Victoria. In Oregon, they drew 5,000 people in the rain, according to newspaper reports of the day.

The family scrapbooks hold page after page of newspaper clippings about the band's prowess, and Nancy's in particular.

Back then, even clever girls like Nancy were encouraged to get a job and not to bother with high school graduation. Not that it held her back.

A responsible lass, she began her work life at barely 15. Proficient at shorthand and bookkeeping, she was soon working for Victoria Box and Mattress, fearlessly carrying satchels of money around town for deposit.

"She was a way ahead of her time," says Keith, a retired cement finisher, sitting in the house he helped build in 1964. By then, she had become secretary to the director of plant services at RJH, a position she held for 16 years.

She marched her last parade while pregnant with Mark in 1951, after that playing only for pleasure.



Nancy Baker won many medals for her piping and Highland dancing.

Baker family photo

"Actually, we had a rule. If you were pregnant, you couldn't be a member of the band," recalls her friend and fellow piper Ellie Curtis of Saanich.

"Nancy was quite special to me," says Curtis. "When I came to the West Coast, she arranged a blind date for me and I'm still married to Bob after 57 years."

Nancy had boldly chosen Ma Miller's Pub in the Western Communities for the rendezvous. "Coming from Sask-

atchewan, women weren't allowed to drink in beer parlours," Curtis notes, still a bit taken aback at the nerve of it all.

Nancy and Keith took their first overseas trip in 1972: "Fifteen days across Europe including two meals a day for 79 English pounds," Keith remembers. "One day in each country."

Along the way they met life-long friends Tom and Joan Stuart of Australia and enjoyed several back-and-forth vis-

its over the decades.

There were longer trips to Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Mexico, Costa Rica, the Bahamas, Spain, Portugal and Greece and other countries. "At last count, there were about 22," says Keith. "We even went to Hungary when it was still a Communist country."

Why? "Curiosity."

Later on, but before Keith grew incapacitated by rheumatoid arthritis, they travelled closer to home. "We had a truck camper and every weekend we were away doing something or other."

But Nancy had her limits. Always lady-like, she drew the line at any vehicle not equipped with a bathroom.

For what would be her last journey, daughter Debra had to wait while she put on her makeup and good clothes. Even heading for medical care, she wanted to look her best.

Debra, an inspector with the Victoria Fire Department, describes herself as a "bad-ass little daughter" who never wore a kilt. "No way I was going to play the bagpipes. I definitely regret it now. I wish I had carried on my mother's legacy."

*Island Lives is a weekly series celebrating the lives of Island people who have died recently. The series focuses not on the famous, but on our neighbours who have led interesting lives or made a difference in their communities. If you know of someone whose life should be celebrated, let us know by e-mail at [features@tc.canwest.com](mailto:features@tc.canwest.com) or by mail.*