

Irvine program (home-) schools kids on joys of nature



The Irvine Nature Center in Owings Mills hosts 12-week Earth Friends programs in spring and fall for students who are home-schooled. (Brian Krista)

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La Tasha Vanzie is an unabashed fan of the great outdoors. The Owings Mills mother of three traces her love for hiking and exploring to the outdoor curriculum that was part of her elementary school experience in Massachusetts.

When it came time to educate her children, Vanzie wanted them to have the same positive experience. That meant enrolling her sons, Solace, 9, and Nasir, 7, in Earth Friends, a home-schooling program run by the Irvine Nature Center in Owings Mills.

"Nature learning is the most fundamental type of learning," said Vanzie, an ardent camper and hiker. "We know that everything on Earth sustains us."

Begun in 2013, the Earth Friends program offers an array of nature-based programs for children ages 5-12 who are home-schooled. Classes, which are mostly held outdoors, run for 12 weeks in the spring and fall. The program enrolls about 55 children from Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard and Carroll counties. The classes typically have eight to 12 students and run Monday through Thursday for 2 1/2 hours.

Irvine's 200 acres provide "a beautiful backdrop for our content," said Stephanie Holzman, who has headed Earth Friends since 2016. "The outdoor setting just lends itself to have children investigate."

And investigate they do. On a typical day, students can be found foraging for edible plants such as "autumn olives," a scarlet fruit that tastes something like a cross between a currant and a pie cherry, or learning about the 20 kinds of frogs and toads native to Maryland. Students also put on nature-themed skits and learn about outdoor safety.

"This program gets the kids out in all conditions," said Valerie Soles, of Baltimore, whose 7-year-old son Alden has been home-schooled since 2015. Soles heard about Earth Friends through a friend and immediately jumped at the chance to get Alden more time outdoors.

"I'm not always willing to take him out in the rain," said Soles, who moved to Baltimore from Brooklyn, N.Y. "It's great for him to be around adults who are so knowledgeable about the outdoors." Soles has a 4-year-old daughter who she hopes to enroll in the program.

According to the Maryland Homeschool Association's most recent figures, 26,975 children were home-schooled statewide in 2014-15, with Baltimore County accounting for 2,631 students. Nationally, 1.77 million school-age population were homeschooled in the 2011-12 school year, according to the government's National Center for Education Statistics.

While there are no statistics on the number of nature-based home-school programs, Holzman said what distinguishes Earth Friends is that it

takes outdoor science learning beyond a one-time opportunity.

"What's unique about our program is that we have so much acreage and science-based resources that we can use to understand biology and history," she said. "Irvine had multiple ways that home school families can adapt our resources for learning."

Hot chocolate and sassafras tea

Sarah McIver of Catonsville decided to home-school her daughter Avie, 6, after "struggling with the length of school in kindergarten."

"We were feeling the burnout from her kindergarten," said McIver, who became interested in Earth Friends after Avie participated in a nature preschool program in Catonsville. "In kindergarten, children would get only 20 minutes of recess, McIver said. "That was part of what led us to do this, to get her more free unstructured time to just be a kid."

Since beginning the Earth Friends program in 2016, Avie is more relaxed and curious about her surroundings, McIver said. "She sees a hawk go by and wants to tell us about it. For math class she comes up with how to tailor it to include nature." Avie also has started a home nature collection.

An added benefit of Avie being in nature is that now her whole family has a renewed interest in getting outside. Before she had children, McIver said she was an avid rock climber and backpacker. "Now as a family we go hiking and camping," she said. "When it's raining we always send Avie out to play."

Stephanie Holzman believes children are much tougher than parents think. "Just being in nature enhances children's physical activity," said Holzman, noting that classes are held indoors only during ice storms or high-winds conditions.

To ward off rain and cold and other inclement weather, students gather around fire pits and drink hot chocolate and sassafras tea. They also learn how to construct "debris shelters" on the trail in case they are caught in bad weather. The Forest Explorers class talks about being on the trail in stormy weather. Outdoor safety and resourcefulness are stressed.

"The kids are hardy — they have snow boots and warm jackets," Holzman said.

During hikes, which can be up to three miles long, students sing "old-fashioned camp songs" and make up new ones. "These kids come with boundless energy," Holzman said. "Their enthusiasm is contagious to the other children."

Parents are encouraged to participate in the programs either by coming on the hikes or communicating with teachers. Students keep nature journals, while teachers share students' information with parents through blog entries, which are then sent home to parents with pictures.

La Tasha Vanzie, whose home is within walking distance of Soldier's Delight Natural Environment Area, said that neighbors whose children go to public school come to her house to learn about nature and to hike with her children in Soldier's Delight.

Given their exposure to nature, Vanzie doesn't worry her children will grow up to be couch potatoes. While her children love technology, they also love being outdoors.

"My children want to design video games, not play them," Vanzie said. "They are really balanced children. They are happy being outdoors. They build nature into their video games."

For Valerie Soles, the Earth Friends program means getting her son a nature-centered education without the strictures of a formal classroom. "It's like school, but freer," she said.

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