Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie
National Forest

Forest FEATURES

Neighborhood begins in the wild

Youth cultivate a sense of self through stewardship

It's not easy being a teenager in a new country: you don't speak the language, you don't know how to act and you don't fit in. For kids who arrive to the Chinatown/ International District in downtown Seattle, a unique neighborhood program has an answer.

Phi Ngo plays in the snow after a long snowshoe hike at Stevens Pass Nordic Center. This is Phi's second year with WILD.

"Understanding the language and social norms are the hardest barriers these kids face," said Alma Dea Michelena, manager of the Wilderness Inner-city Leadership Development Program.

She said that new schools, new homes, different languages, cultures, religions and social etiquettes are some of the struggles for immigrant and refugee kids. "'I was a straight A student in China; now I barely pull D's and I study all the time,' I hear this from many of my kids," said Michelena. Not being able to speak the language hurts their self confidence, and the WILD program provides a safe place to learn English and the culture.

The International District Housing Authority created WILD in 1997 to inspire high school aged teens to develop their potential through social and environmental justice projects in their neighborhoods and in the wilderness.

Every year WILD helps about 100 teenagers aged 14-18. Their environmental projects helped clean up the Chinatown/ International District by removing graffiti, picking up trash, teaching residents about the benefits of recycling and composting, pushing for dumpster-free alleys and caring for the community pea-patch garden.

"Shared resources connect these public lands to the city," said Sharyne Shiu Thornton, executive director of IDHA. She said the program gets teens into a wilderness setting, an experience many have never had. "A river that runs through the city roots are in the wild and our youth need to understand that interdependence, that what affects nature affects us and vice versa," she said.

Since 2002, WILD youth experience the

Thanh Thao Truong, WILD student, uses a pulaski to till up and aerate the soil, which helps to restore the native vegetation along Picture Lake Trail.

Kelly Lei, WILD student, uses loppers to cut up roots along the West Fork Foss Trail in the Skykomish Ranger District.

wilderness first hand on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, which runs east of Seattle on the western slopes of the Cascades. They work on trail crews restoring and maintaining hiking trails, rehabilitating historic fire lookouts, planting native shrubs or snowshoeing and learning about nature's winter ecosystem. The WILD program encourages the teens to go on to higher education. "We are broadening the kid's horizons, opening their eyes to careers in marine biology, wilderness management and green development," Michelena said. WILD also partners with the North Cascades Institute and Seattle Parks and Recreation in getting teens outdoors.

Some of the outings for WILD youth include translating for community elders while viewing the Skagit River bald eagles, learning about migratory birds at Padilla Bay or discovering where mountain goats live in the forest. The youth are also responsible for translating information for the entire community on everything from recycling and composting to the benefits of clean air. Some of the kids work at the community center teaching elders English as a second language. This way the teens stay connected to their historical and cultural roots while the elders learn a new language. It helps the youth learn English and social norms faster.

At last year's holiday dinner and gift drive for IDHA, on stage in front of 200 people, three teens were the masters of ceremony, translating English, Cantonese and Mandarin. "When I first started they wouldn't even make eye contact with me without looking like they would cry. Their English was poor and they would only communicate through one of their peers," said Michelena.

The Chinatown/International District is a confluence of Asian immigrant groups: the Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese and Southeast Asian people. Recently immigrants and refugees from east Africa and Somalia are moving into the area. The community has historically been referred to as Chinatown, but 10 years ago changed the name to the Chinatown/International District to encompass all ethnic minorities.

IDHA began in the 70s to unite the neighborhood over low-income elderly who were being displaced by the construction of Kingdome. "We started

with housing surveys to assess the needs of the residents who were being ignored because of language and income," Thornton said. The alliance developed as a grass-roots community nonprofit organization to help with housing advocacy, eviction prevention, and rental assistance for the ethnic, cultural and linguistic minority. "Our core seed was housing services and out of that grew community support services, social and environmental justice aspects," said Thornton.

Once a month IDHA community meetings address such issues as implementing ORCA cards and utility assistance, or organizing events like the Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Day. IDHA and WILD has grown to help immigrants and refugees throughout the Seattle area, from Northgate to Renton. "Grandma may still live here, but the adult children and extended family have moved," Thornton said.

Immigrants move by choice and refugees are forced to move. "Refugee status brings a particular package of psychological and emotional challenges," said Thornton. "Forced relocation brings unique challenges for our kids," she said. WILD engages youth who are potentially at risk due to poverty, language or access to resources other youth typically have. "We offer them stability, focus and opportunities that provide a positive sense of self," Thornton said.

For more information about WILD visit http://www.apialliance.org/ or contact Alma Dea Michelena at 206-623-5132.

Story and photos by Kelly Sprute
March 2011

WILD students help restore the native vegetation along the Picture Lake Trail in the Mt. Baker Ranger District. Mt. Shuksan is in the background.

Sokam Tom points out an eagle to Libby Mills, Irene Situ and Jim Chu of the Forest Service at the Migratory Bird Festival at Padilla Bay.