



## **Cross Country Skiing Overnighter for the Washington School for the Blind**

Over 25 students from the Washington School for the Blind (WSSB) spent two days participating in educational programs and having fun in the snow March 19 and 20. This annual event is now in its 7th year and has evolved into a highly successful partnership between the Mt. Hood National Forest, other federal agencies, multiple non-profits, city

governments, and private businesses. The event is designed to provide children with visual impairments a chance to relate to their sighted peers and the world, while building courage, self-esteem, community, and life-long friendships.



“WSSB’s Recreation Mission is to develop lifelong leisure skills and interests for our students through a wide variety of activities in a non-threatening and success-oriented environment,” said Adrienne Fernandez, Recreation Coordinator for WSSB. “And the Forest Service has

been the catalyst in providing this opportunity for our students.”

WSSB students arrived at the Tea Cup Lodge on the Mt. Hood National Forest just before lunchtime on the 19th, which gave them the entire afternoon to cross country ski with trained guides, go sledding, and make snow forts. Later in the evening, participants enjoyed a home-cooked meal at Parkdale City Hall, along with a Forest Service presentation given by wildlife biologists. Due to the inclement weather on the 20<sup>th</sup>, the scheduled outdoor activities had to be cancelled, but the students enjoyed a tour of the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center instead.



The program is designed to provide the students with opportunities to develop relationships, but as significant as this program is for the kids, according to Mark Raetzman, Director of the Residential Programs Department for WSSB, the most profound impact is felt by the adult advisors and volunteers. “We who watch from the



outside, probably get a lot more from these kids than we could ever give to them,” said Raetzman. “It’s just incredible to watch these amazing kids grow up and to be a small part of their experience - helping them grow and learn to be as independent as they can be.”

Many moving parts have to be coordinated to make a program like this a success. WWSB relies on the Forest Service to provide the venue for activities, educational programming, and some of the funding so that the school can offer the program free of charge to participants. Tea Cup Nordic Club provided facilities this year, and the Mt. Hood Track Ski Shop provided skis and other equipment. Through these contributions and everyone's hard work, the students are able to have a life changing experience in the outdoors.

"Just going down the hills on skis, and the quiet as the wind rushes through your hair," said Brock Spence, a first time participant of this event. "It's a great experience." Through the many years he has participated in the program, Reatzman has seen a consistent, wonderful pattern emerge. "This is an experience that the kids will talk about not just for days and weeks after, but years later. We keep in contact with many of our students and these are the sorts of experiences these kids will remember for years to come."

