



Celebrating



#2 Milwaukee River Canoe Trip

by Bob Kann

"Using the path of the river to naturally teach students about rural to urban development, and the effect that development has on the river, is unparalleled to teaching in the classroom."

~Margaret Cope, Summer Canoe Trip Chaperone

As part of A@L's commitment to hands-on Eco-Literacy, A@L facilitates excursions that connect students directly with nature. These environmental explorations are designed to expand students' understanding of and appreciation for the natural world.

In 2015, Students from 6 Milwaukee Public Schools embarked on a 5-day canoe expedition on the Milwaukee River to document water within a changing environment through paint, film, and photography. Their resulting artwork culminated in an exhibition at the A@L Gallery.



Arts @ Large CEO Sean Kiebzak describes the trip.

"The civil rights tour {A@L 2014 trip} modeled for us that we can take students on overnight trips to explore really cool content. I'm like, 'Oh, heck yeah.' I'm a canoe guide, a Wilderness First Responder, Certified Interpretive Guide through the National Association for Interpretation, and a Land Ethic Leader through the Aldo Leopold Foundation. I put together all the ideas to create a four-night five-day trip on the Milwaukee River where we recruited about six or seven students and several chaperones.

Before the trip, we met every other week and participated in different experiences to prepare ourselves for the trip. We were going to be taking middle school and high school-aged students who would be coming together from different schools throughout Milwaukee. We went to the Urban Ecology Center and practiced canoeing. We also did water quality sampling because one of the things we wanted to do was look at the quality of water through a changing environment, through micro invertebrates, and the macro invertebrates so we could determine the health of the water from the northern part of the Milwaukee River where we started compared to where it empties into Lake Michigan. We also did like a bunch of restorative practices so that all our students got trained as circle keepers. So, we really were preparing for the dynamics of how we'd be communicating and addressing conflict during the trip, too.

During the trip itself, we invented all kinds of artistic experiences. We did documentation through film and photography throughout the adventure. We stopped and did plein air painting at one of the locations. We did an overnighter at the Urban Ecology Center and played a great game of Hide and Go Seek because we had the place all to ourselves. It was very playful and fun.

Another thing that was really cool is we stayed one night at a scout camp near Pioneer Village. I think it was our second night of the trip, and I had scheduled a surprise visit from an Aztec dance group. We had the students all settled in and then all of a sudden this dance group that had been hiding in the back part of the center busted out in their traditional Aztec regalia. They did a performance for us and then we got to dance with them, so there was a really cool performance and dancing component.

We spent the last night in the hall of the Dennis Sullivan, which is a Tall Ship. The next day we sailed out onto Lake Michigan, which was a wonderful end to our trip, seeing the cityscape from the lake.



It was a wonderful experience, and for all the students it was physically challenging. They experienced several art forms and team building. It connected them to nature in a way that was different from what many of them had experienced in the past. After the trip, a few of the students continued to engage with A@L on environmentally focused activities. One of the students worked in A@L's Career Development Program and now works for Reflo, which focuses on sustainable water use and green development issues."

Akili Please-Carnie was in eighth grade when she went on the Milwaukee River Canoe Trip. She is currently attending Alcorn State University majoring in biochemistry.

Akili Pleas-Carnie tells her story of the canoe trip in an interview with Author Bob Kann.

Tell me the story of the Milwaukee canoe river trip.

There is a lot about this trip that was so amazing and educational It really opened my eyes to nature, and it truly got me out of my comfort zone.

How did it open your eyes to nature?

Honestly, being this kid who was just learning about the whole environment of the Milwaukee River, it was really an eye-opening experience because I never got to learn so much about nature in this span of a few weeks.

What do you remember you learned?

I learned about the health of the Milwaukee River and ecosystems. And it was really crazy to know that there's so much more than just like a river, and there's so much more going on within this ecosystem.

In what ways did the trip push you out of your comfort zone?

As I said, I was never the type to venture out to nature. This trip really pushed me out of my comfort zone. I was never the type to be around bugs or trees. This river trip got me out there.

Had you ever paddled a canoe before this trip?

Absolutely not. It was super scary. It was super intimidating to think about being on a canoe in the river. But this whole thing was so much fun. And actually after this trip, at my school I was in "environmental," so I got to do two more canoe trips on the Milwaukee River. And of course, I wanted to go. I can do this.



On your college track team website, it says that you major in biochemistry. Is there any relationship between that river trip and what you're majoring in now?
It definitely did lead me into being in biochemistry and the biology of life. That canoe trip was an initial start thinking about what makes us as a whole.

What's happened now in terms of your thoughts about going into nature? Do you avoid it or do you look for it?

I definitely look for it when I get the chance. I love going into nature. On my college campus, when I am going to the gym, there's trails that I take every time. And even though it is a shortcut, I actually like going through the trails and just breathing in nature. Nature is really grounding, and I honestly love just being in nature. It grounds you in life. There's so much more to life.

What was the most important thing you learned from that trip?

The most important thing I learned was to always reach out to nature and learning more about your environment is so important because I feel our society now - we're a generation now we don't reach out as much to nature and it's like really showing in where the world could possibly be leading to. Yeah, it's very important to learn about nature at a young age.

What were the most fun things about the trip for you?

Oh my god. The whole trip was fun for me. Getting to sleep under the deck of the Dennis Sullivan was definitely one of the coolest things to do. And things like playing Hide and Seek in Urban Ecology Center was so much fun. And just being on the Milwaukee River was awesome.

Anything else you want to add in celebration of A@L's 20th anniversary?

I'm truly thankful that I got part of this Milwaukee River Canoe Trip. It was a great experience, and I would do it all over again with the same people because it was truly a life-changing experience for me because now I love nature and I would like to get into nature more and honestly probably do a trip like that again. Of course, I loved the educational part of the trip because that was a big thing that I was never exposed to. This trip definitely was learning more about nature and the inner workings and all ecosystems. It was a great thing to learn about when I was younger because I'm more aware now of what I can do to help.



About the Author

Bob Kann grew up in Skokie, Illinois, but it happened so long ago that he remembers nothing of the event.

As a child, he loved sports above all else and could perform a standing back flip by the age of nine. His mother worried that reading nothing but sports books would stunt Bob's intellectual growth, but his older brother assured her that he would eventually read books on other topics (he did). Little did any of them know that he also would write several books including a book about a baseball player and another about an athlete who competed in several sports. Listening to his father's tales about growing up during the Depression, driving at the age of twelve to make deliveries for his father's store, and other stories of the south side of Chicago planted the seeds for Bob's later passion for storytelling.

Bob attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, became a teacher, received his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and later a Professor of Education at UW-Parkside and UW-Stevens Point. Shortly after becoming a professor, Bob realized he liked making his students laugh more than he liked teaching them. He recognized that what he wanted to next undertake was simultaneously entertaining children and adults since this seemed limitlessly interesting and creative.

In 1982, Bob became a storyteller, juggler, and magician who began performing for children and families throughout the United States. In 1985, he realized that being a former teacher/professor turned entertainer, he had unique insights into the relationship between entertainment and education. Hence, he began teaching graduate classes and presenting keynotes and workshops for educators and nonprofit organizations on topics related to humor, storytelling, creativity, and motivation. (Coincidentally, A@L CEO Emeritus contracted with Bob to perform at the PumpHouse Regional Arts Center in LaCrosse, WI at the beginning of his career. Bob continued providing great educational programming at various organizations where Sullivan worked and subsequently was one of the first artists to work with Arts @ Large in 2001.)

As a free-lancer for more than thirty years, Bob has developed many interests which have led him to produce storytelling tapes and write books for children, design curriculum for teachers, collect and write historical stories for nonprofit organizations, and apply his research skills as a consultant for social service agencies.

Bob believes it's easier to climb the ladder of success when it's lying flat on the ground. He usually can be found reading his favorite book on levitation. He simply can't put it down.