

The winter camping trip was one of extreme variety as far as the weather goes. The group consisting of Jerry St. James, Michael Blair, Cody Henderson and Maggie Otto, led by Joe & Theresa Whitenight left home on Friday afternoon, February 15th and traveled to the Pigeon River State Forest. The group watch the temperature fall and they traveled north. By the time we reached Pickerel Lake Campground the temperature was reading ten degrees above zero. It was a clear night so we knew it was going to get colder. We cleared the snow and set up our tents. Unrolled our sleeping bags and collected some firewood. The kids attempted to get a fire started but it was not a complete success. By the time it was getting started it was time to turn in for the night. We heated some water and filled up our water bottles with warm water. Unfortunately, Jerry's water bottle decided to somehow open just after he placed it in the bottom of his sleeping bag. Just as we were going to sleep, Jerry came over and said, I need another sleeping bag. Luckily we had a spare in the van but it wasn't a zero degree bag like the one he got wet. Michael and Jerry got the spare bag out and got settled, Cody slept through the entire bag-changing episode. Maggie shared a tent with another teen from the Kingsley High School Outdoor Survival Class that joined us for this trip. Maggie tried to get our dog, Coal, to join her and Isabelle in their tent, but Coal is a creature of habit. He was in our tent as soon as it was set up. He knows where he belongs. We couldn't convince him to trade tents.

When we woke in the morning we checked our thermometers. It was official the temperature read negative eleven degrees. That is a cold morning. We needed to take our tents down and pack up our sleds. Our stove decided it was just too cold to work, so we couldn't heat water. Luckily many of us had kept our water bottles from freezing by sleeping with them. It was a chore to pack up with frozen fingers. No matter how hard you try, you have to keep taking your gloves off to get packed. By 10 a.m. we had all of the sleds ready to go and we were really ready to get moving. Lindsey Whitenight and Russell LaForte arrived just before it was time to get moving.

It wasn't long before we warmed up after hitting the trail. Carrying backpacks, pulling sleds and wearing snowshoes is a great way to get warm. Less than 15 minutes into our hike we were taking layers off and feeling great. Even our fingers and toes were warm again. The partly sunny day resulted in temperatures that ranged from about 15 to 20 degrees once it started warming up. Coal was very entertaining on the trail. He has a bad habit of deciding to lay down in the middle of the trail right in front of people causing the people to trip over him. Coal caused more than one hiker to fall over.

The cross country hike through the woods, up and down hills ended as we reached our camping site about 12:30 in the afternoon. As soon as we reached the campsite the snow shovels were unstrapped and the snow shoveling began in earnest. This activity kept every extremely warm. In fact, even more layers came off during the shoveling. Each group had to make a snow pile that was about 10 feet across and about 7 feet high. Lindsey and Russell were a big help getting our camp situated. Lindsey helped collect firewood and shovel snow on the quinzees while Russell dug out the entire area for the group kitchen. He started the fire and got the pots of snow hanging over the fire so we would have hot water the entire day. Melting the snow is the only source of water on this trip so it is vital to get it going as soon as possible. After most of the work was done Lindsey and Russell hiked back to their vehicles, breaking the trail for our return trip in the morning. We always take a little different trail on the way out so it nice to have

someone go ahead of us and get the snow packed a bit. Then they returned to Lansing. It was nice having them along even though it was just for the day.

Once all the shoveling was done it was time for lunch. The stove was working again. Nice warm burritos! Made from caribou meat from the fall hunt. The kids loved them even though they didn't know what they were eating. Maggie says she wouldn't have eaten it if she knew it was caribou. But she enjoyed the two she did eat, thinking it was beef.

Winter camping is a trip of work. When the shoveling ended it was time to collect firewood. Then it was time to put 12 inch long sticks into our snow piles. These sticks serve as guides when it is time to start digging. We want to leave the walls of the quinzee 12 inches thick. After the firewood was gathered and the sticks poked in, the kids and Mrs. Whitenight took a walk up the steep hill to what is called the "Honeymoon Cabin." No one knows why the cabin has that name, but that's what it has always been called. The cabin overlooks a huge scenic valley. It is a cute little cabin with a field stone fireplace. However, the front wall of the cabin has been removed, to prevent people from trying to live there. The cabin is always an interesting place to visit. People camp there, they leave food, tools, furniture and a written record of who has been there and when. After our visit we collect some more firewood on our hike back to camp. Now it was time to start digging out the quinzees. This is a process that takes nearly two hours to complete. But once it was over, these were some of the nicest quinzees ever. The kids all did a great job. Michael, Jerry and Cody shared one quinzee, Maggie and Isabelle shared another, Joe & I shared a third. The rest of the Kingsley kids, their chaperones and John, a trainee from the UP all were success quinzee builders as well. Terry Umlor decided he would just help everyone else build their quinzees, but he slept in his tent.

Once the quinzees were dug out completely it was time to get the bedrolls set up in each one and change clothes. Digging out a quinzee is always a wet process. Between sweating and snow it is important to change clothes when the process is finished. It feels great to get a full set of dry clothes on and gather by the fire to make dinner.

Once everyone was gathered around the fire, Joe had the beef stew (truly beef) hot and ready. The kids loved it. I even heard the comment, "this is better than my mom's beef stew." The funny part is, everything tastes delicious when you are winter camping. It wouldn't matter what we fed the kids, if it is hot, it is delicious! We spent some time around the fire talking about the day, discussing what had gone well, what we could improve on, what we had learned. Most of the kids loved building the quinzees. That was the high for many of the kids. Some of the kids thought the hike was hard, some even called it "brutal." That makes us laugh a little. The kids who have been backpacking in Kentucky know that this short hike could not be called "brutal" by any stretch of the imagination. But, for some it was challenging. After we all had time to process the day some kids turned in for the night. Maggie enjoyed sitting by the fire listening to all of the conversations around her. Michael and Jerry took a walk up the hill and tried to call in some owls. Cody turned in, he was tired. The night was mostly clear but the moon had this awesome ring or halo around it. I had always been told this was caused by ice crystals. We were all expecting snow in the morning. But we were very surprised as we got up the next morning, not to snow but to rain! The freezing rain started slowly. Joe made sure to quickly wake everyone up and let them know they

needed to get packing. We heated water and had quick breakfasts. We didn't want to be out in that rain any longer than necessary. By 9:10 we were packed and hitting the trail. We pushed the group pretty hard to get back quickly. The rain continued to increase through the hike. We reached the vans by 11:10. Even though most of us were wearing raincoats or waterproof winter coats, we were all very wet. We were a bit concerned over the condition of the road. It seemed pretty ice covered. We loaded up our gear in record time and made our way out of the campground. The van made it out to the road just fine. The road was ice covered, but had been sanded. Our friend, Sam Cornelius, who lives in Gaylord had contacted the road commission to tell them we were coming about and the road needed to be sanded by noon. They assured him they would watch out for us and they sure did. Sam is a great resource for this trip. He knows when we go in and when to expect us to come out. He is our safety net. We really appreciate his concern and awareness.

The road to Vanderbilt was very ice covered, but we went slowly and once we got to the expressway it was much better. The expressway between Vanderbilt and Gaylord had been salted and was slushy but very passable. We stopped in Gaylord to have lunch at Ponderosa. The kids love it there, they can eat all they want, they get free refills and there is a lot of variety. The first thing the kids did when we got to Ponderosa was change into dry clothes. That felt great. When we left Gaylord the temperature had risen and the road had improved even more. We had to make a quick stop at Jay's Sporting Goods so Michael could buy an owl call. He surprised everyone by also buying a spring trap. He had Mr. Whitenight show him how to set it as Mrs. Whitenight was driving. Of course, Mr. Whitenight had the whole van cracking up when he pretended to get his finger caught in the trap. We hope Michael is more careful with it.

Once we got south of Grayling, the roads were really great. We couldn't believe it as we drove south the temperature rose to as high as 44 degrees. So we had experienced quite a variety of temperatures on this short trip. We knew we were going to get home fairly early so we made a stop in Imlay City for Dairy Queen. But to our surprise, their Dairy Queen closes for the winter. So we settled for ice-cream at Big Boy's. We had our amulet ceremony there. The amulet was awarded to Maggie. She was nervous about going on this trip, being she was the only girl in our group. But she decided to go anyway. She did a super job of staying organized, taking care of herself, helping others and enjoying the trip. She learned a lot about staying warm and being prepared. Michael was a close runner up. All of the kids did a great job on this trip. It is always a learning experience. Even though we have done it many times, we learn something new each time. Every winter camping trip has its own personality. This one was no different. It was filled with variety and challenges. The kids all had fun and are planning on going again next year.