

The Kroka Community School, A New Blending of Academics and Outdoor Education.



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Published in *Waldorf Today*, January 18, 2021 edition

Watching a group of middle school students running up a hill, entering their classroom, ruddy cheeked and wide-eyed after doing morning chores and eating breakfast prepared over a wood burning fire, was not what we expected to see on the Kroka campus during this past autumn. But unusual times called for new and creative ideas, and Kroka responded to this call from a group of parents and their children by starting some new programs.

Kroka expeditions, in Marlow, NH, has long been known for providing successful summer programs, school trips, day programs for local schools, and semester programs. Last spring, like so many other organizations working with young people, Kroka found spring school visits cancelled as remote learning programs became the norm, and we were unsure of what the summer might look like. We decided to go ahead with the planning for our usual residential programs, hoping for the best, and working every step of the way with NH state officials through the ever-changing requirements for camps. We were supported in this effort by the many families whose children were already signed up for camp, who were imploring us to provide a nature-based social experience for their children, many of whom were wilting from on-line learning and a separation from their friends. We hung in there, constantly updating our protocols, and we ended up being one of only a few sleep-over camps that remained open over this past summer. We had a full summer of programs, and, thankfully, no cases of Covid.

Then an interesting thing happened - instead of recruiting the usual twelve students for our autumn semester we had many more young people pleading to be part of a four-month program. We answered their need by running two semesters this autumn, one for high school students and one for college students, developing curriculum so participants in each group could receive credit for their experience. But the need didn't stop there. We had parents and younger children clamoring for their own program. Although we had spoken for many years about starting a program for middle school students, the logistics had always seemed daunting. But with this need right in front of us we decided to create something to meet these younger students, and so a residential program for 7th - 9th graders was developed out of pure inspiration during the three

weeks before the beginning of school. It is a work in progress, but after completing a very successful first semester the teachers and administrative staff have been delighted to craft a winter and spring curriculum that meets the needs of the enthusiastic students who will be returning to campus in January.

The challenge for Kroka is balancing traditional academic subjects with an outdoor curriculum. Our students live together on the Kroka campus in two-week blocks. The first week finds them focusing on academics, with a history or language arts main lesson every morning and math and hands-on science work in the afternoon. Time for reading and study hall is also built into the day. The rest of the day might find the group mountain biking to a neighbor's house to stack wood, working with the animals on the Kroka farm, or working in the farm gardens. For their daily fitness class, they might run through the trails around the campus, swim laps across the pond, or mountain bike along the Kroka trails. The schedule is flexible, so if the weather is perfect for rock climbing one day, we can move around their activities to take advantage of the conditions in the natural world.

During the fall program, students carved spoons, engaged in nature crafts, cooked their meals on a wood burning stove, and gathered for a nightly meeting and singing before bed. For the second week the students packed their gear and set off on expedition. After hearing about the geological history and then the history of the Indigenous people and the European immigrants, they set off on trips as diverse as canoe-sailing down Lake Champlain and exploring and surfing on Cape Cod. Science studies in the field used the landscape as a lab, and nature poetry took on new meaning when recited outside around a cozy campfire. At the end of the second week the students were picked up by family members for a weekend at home. On Monday morning everyone living and working on the Kroka campus had a Covid test before the new block began.

For the final expedition this autumn, students and their teachers spent the week in Grassy Brook, a wilderness area right next to the Kroka campus. There, among other activities, they built debris huts in small groups scattered through the woods and spent the night alone with their group, each preparing meals around the fires they had made. Learning the skills necessary to live comfortably and sustainably in nature is a heartfelt desire of young people the world over, and the Kroka Community School has wholeheartedly taken up the challenge of offering middle schoolers this experience, developing a new kind of education that melds traditional schooling with outdoor education and service to the community.

Please contact Kroka Expeditions for more information and to receive applications for our Fall 2021 programs.