

# Looking for Fun? Wilderness Works!

Enthusiastic phone calls and overnight lock-ins weren't what Bill Mickler had in mind when he started Wilderness Works, a program that offers outdoor adventure activities to kids who might otherwise go without. But 15 years later he's amazed at how the program has evolved, and he isn't the least bit surprised when one of his students can't contain their excitement and calls to discuss an upcoming program or event. This is exactly what keeps him going.

With more than 70 kids currently on the roster, Mickler is delighted by the tremendous response Wilderness Works has received. What started with monthly excursions has grown to include after-school activities and weekend enrichment clinics for kids from 8-14. The program, supported in large part by community volunteers, "is about empowering kids," says Mickler, "and we do that by helping our students realize their full potential and by reinforcing the importance of education."

While there are no true requirements for participating in the program, there is a point system that each student is asked to adhere to. "We put the kids in charge of their own involvement," explains Mickler. "They have to maintain their school work, and we encourage regular attendance and participation in the program. This helps them understand the importance of accountability, and it gives them a sense of security that comes from developing a routine."

There is also a service component. Six times a year, the Wilderness Works group participates in a volunteer project of some variety. "Our goal is to get the kids involved in the communities where they live at an early age. That way they're more likely to continue as they get older," says Mickler.

As the program's only full-time staff member, Mickler found himself in need of extra hands: "The program just kept growing—with each new kid I realized that I needed two more adults just to keep everyone engaged," he says.

Volunteers serve in a role similar to that of a camp counselor. They engage in all aspects of the program—from leading after-school activities to serving as chaperones for field trips and retreats—and their support is crucial to its on-going success. That's why Mickler connected with Hands On Atlanta.

Because of the nature of the activities, Mickler points out that the project is a good fit for groups. "The kids really appreciate the opportunity to interact with people of all ages and backgrounds. They're constantly learning new things, and are excited by all of the friends that they're making through the program."



Bill Mickler enjoys his afternoon teaching students about the great outdoors.

And that seems to be what keeps them coming back. "We've had a number of kids graduate from the program and return a few years later to volunteer," says Mickler. "There are so many great relationships that have developed and so many success stories that have resulted—and it's all because of the great work that our volunteers are doing. Most don't realize how much their involvement means to the kids."

For more information on how you can get involved with Wilderness Works, please see their project listing on page 22.