2nd Grade Teacher Learns About Wildlife Conservation and Giving Back at SCI Foundation's American Wilderness Leadership School.

By Katie Baker



It started with an email from my dad, Paul Baker, with the title "You need to do this!" and a link to the SCIF website and American Wilderness leadership School (AWLS) page. My initial reaction was "here 's another spam email from dad", however, 30 minutes later I was printing out my application, typing an email to Todd Roggenkamp, and trying to convince myself that if I wasn't accepted, it would be OK. Although I knew from the moment I read about AWLS that it would be an amazing experience, never did I imagine it would be as life changing as it was.

As I landed in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, I had no idea what to expect. I knew no one who had been to AWLS and I knew no one who was participating in my session. I was greeted by John and Laura Valley who I would later find out were my National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP) instructors for the week. My fears lessened as we met up with three other teachers who were also attending alone. The hour-long drive from

the airport to AWLS was filled with postcard-worthy landscape. When we arrived, we unloaded our luggage and entered the dining hall for a quick introduction and our first dinner. I was shocked to see that there were 37 other teachers participating in the session. Over the next 8 days, I would learn, grow, and create lifelong friendships with this amazing group of educators.



Our 8 days were filled with instruction on wildlife ecology/conservation, outdoor survival skills, stream ecology, firearm safety, archery instruction through NASP, and several field trips. The days were jam-packed, starting at 7:30 am and ending most nights at 8 pm, however everyone stayed engaged throughout the sessions. Although we learned about the vital role hunting plays in conservation and experienced shooting firearms, the program was never aimed to turn participants into hunters. The goal of AWLS is to show educators the “hows and whys of conservation” in hopes that they will bring this understanding back to their classrooms and spread it to their students.
A flagpole is displayed on the grounds of AWLS with a plaque that reads, “This flagpole stands in memory of Joe Lawler, avid sportsman, true conservationist, and energetic supporter of The American Wilderness Leadership School. Joe’s vision for a school that can educate the public about the true role of sport hunting as a necessary tool in wildlife management is being realized through AWLS. You be the judge of the role of

hunting…but take the time to learn the facts before you judge. Joe would want it that way". This idea resonates within every activity, lecture, and field trip.



During my time at AWLS, I learned ways that I already help contribute to wildlife conservation, ways that I can be more involved, and ways that as a 2nd grade teacher, I can teach my students about conservation. I also learned a great deal about Safari Club International, Safari Club International Foundation, and all of the efforts aimed at education, conservation, and humanitarian services. It was here that I was introduced to the Bell Family/SafariCare Blue Bag Program, a humanitarian effort designed to help SCI members give back to communities within the US and internationally. I immediately contacted Todd about how I could organize to take a Blue Bag with me on my upcoming safari to South Africa. With the quick help of Karen Crehan at SCIF, I was able to do so.

I opted to take my Blue Bag to South Africa empty and with the help of my Professional Hunter, Roche Du Preez and his wife Ansu at Roche Safaris, I filled my bag with various school supplies, hygiene products, and soccer balls. We were given the opportunity to deliver the bag to Thanda Primary School in Hectorspruit while on our hunting safari this July. The school has over 721 students with only 8 classrooms. One classroom

holds 94 students with only one teacher. We were fortunate enough to speak with two of the wonderful teachers who work at the school. It was amazing to hear how dedicated and passionate these women are to these children and their education. They thanked us endlessly for our gifts and showed us around the school, including the vegetable garden that the students learn to plant and maintain starting in kindergarten.



The impact that this experience has had on me is truly indescribable. Since returning from our trip, I have been working closely with Karen to obtain more resources for my PH to use to help promote the Blue Bags with his other clients. My Blue Bag will also be making its second trip to Africa this September with our good friend, Bill Archibald, on his buffalo hunt to Mozambique with Roche Safaris. I have a strong feeling that this will be the second of many trips that my Blue Bag will make.

It is hard to believe that my journey at AWLS only began early this summer. I have learned so much and have met some of the most knowledgeable and passionate people through this experience. I cannot thank the Safari Club International Foundation enough for all of their help and dedication. I hope that my passion for conservation education and my story can help impact others in the way that the AWLS staff did for me.