

Children's champion

By MARGA LINCOLN - Independent Record - 08/01/08

BOULDER — Last week, Mary Ellen Earnhardt transformed the forest at Muskrat Creek into a vibrant classroom for children in the 21st Century Community Learning Center summer program.

Smelling horsemint, sniffing wild onion, feeling the needles of a Douglas fir tree, searching for pine cones and animal signs kept the students absorbed, as they clustered around their guest instructor, retired science teacher Sam Samson.

"The best learning takes place by accident — if you are having fun and learn by accident," Samson said.

And that just could be the motto for the after-school and summer program Earnhardt directs.

The morning's adventure was just one of many for the students this summer.

It is Earnhardt's adventuresome, energetic spirit, and her devotion to children that in July earned her a prestigious national award — Outstanding Career Practitioner from the National Career Development Association.

Sometimes she's asked what a program for elementary grade students has to do with career development.

To her, the program is all about helping the young students find their passion in life.

"Perhaps that's where my passion is, seeing how important career development is," she said.

Learning through experience is the key to everything they do,

she said.

There's a wave of hands, as the students in the program recite what they've been doing this summer — building birdhouses, setting up a tepee, touring the courthouse and a neighbor's gardens, making a campfire and digging for worms.

Hiking, finding animal bones and mushrooms, riding bikes to High Ore, attending the historic Whitehall movie theater to watch "Old Yeller," and meeting peacocks and chickens and goats.

They've worked their garden plot and their table at the farmers market and made rhubarb jam, zucchini muffins, cookies, salsa and cocoa mix to sell there.

Having a table at farmers market gives the students yet another experience beyond knowing how to can salsa or make muffins — they learn how to sell things and how to interact with community members.

The more chances kids have to find what excites them, the more likely they are to stay in school, Earnhardt said.

"How can we find a new fuel? How can we solve a problem with a beetle infestation? Perhaps it will be these students who will make these discoveries. How can we help them make a difference?"

"Everything we do is career development, so they find success, so they can lead a satisfying and enriching life. It prepares them for the future, it prepares them for the world of work, it prepares them for lifelong service to their community."

Earnhardt knows that many of her students face challenges. Some of their parents struggle to pay the grocery bills and rent.

Earnhardt, who grew up one of 10 children, knows their struggles.

"I just think she's phenomenal," said volunteer Colleen Teeling. "Everything she's into. She nurtures the children. She just shares it. She's so bubbly.

"She brings in so many activities. If it isn't robotics, it's poetry or an author she likes. It's a sense of wonder. It has never stopped. It

doesn't cease."

The community knows Earnhardt is devoted to the children, she said, and the community cares about the program.



IR photo by Marga Lincoln - Mary Ellen Earnhardt, director of the 21st Century Learning Center, interacts with a child in the Boulder summer education program. Earnhardt won the Outstanding Career Practitioner award from the National Career Development Association for her work with the program.



The Boulder 21st CCLC program is considered an exemplary after-school program, according to Sandi Smith, who oversees the programs for the Montana Office of Public Instruction.

This past year, more than 97 percent of Boulder students participated in some aspect of the program.

"She doesn't let any grass grow under her feet," said Smith. "She is incredible with ideas for students. She's just a very creative mind. She's always looking for activities for kids, and the beauty of it is she ties in the community. She brings the program right to them.

"She looks at the poverty in Jefferson County and her heart is just open to those kids."

When Volunteer Donna Bailey goes searching for Earnhardt, she often can't find her because Earnhardt's the same size as the kids.

"I don't know where she gets all her energy," said Bailey. "She's like a 3-year-old.

"She knows how to get their respect. It's just there."

Smith said she hears about the program from others in the area — the children's work with the local genealogy library and heritage center, their organizing of historic tours of Jefferson County, as well as the Fairy Festival at Tizer Gardens.

"People are in awe of what those kids do," Smith said.

So it's not surprising that Earnhardt attracted national attention.

The Outstanding Career Practitioner award is "pretty prestigious," said Deborah Crapes, chairwoman of the awards committee for the NCDA. "They're nominated by their peers."

Rebecca Dedmond, a professor at George Washington University nominated Earnhardt after visiting Boulder this spring to teach a career-planning workshop for educators and parents.

She said she was struck by Earnhardt's "giving spirit, her true and deep caring for young people and her community and her vision that all children should have an opportunity to be successful."

Dedmond accompanied Earnhardt on some errands in Boulder and said she was amazed at what she saw.

"Everywhere she (Earnhardt) went she had such a cadre of passionate and sincere friends willing to give back to the community and the children and her teachers. There was a sense of the community gathering around this collective vision that the children will have a better future. It struck me how the community just rallied around her."

"I don't know that I've ever worked in a community that so gathered around to help with a program for its young people," she said. "I did think that was an amazing community."

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