

‘Hands-on, wet-feet education’

A select group of Strayer eighth graders enjoyed a unique educational experience at the Chincoteague Bay Field Station in Wallops Island.

By Gary Weckselblatt

Though he's retired from decades as a science teacher in the Quakertown Community School District, Pete Jarrett can't stay away from the eighth graders annual four-day trip to the Chincoteague Bay Field Station in Wallops Island, Virginia.

"I enjoy the kids, and I miss teaching," said Jarrett, who began the educational fieldtrip for Strayer Middle School students 32 years ago. "Plus, this facility has my heart strings connected to it. It changed my life as far as being a teacher, and led to a successful, enjoyable teaching career."

As an industrial arts major at Millersville University, Jarrett's class visit to the Virginia-based facility, then called the Marine Science Consortium, "changed my career," he said.

Following his experience at the facility, Jarrett switched majors, and upon graduation was hired by the District in 1979 to teach at Strayer. Within a decade, he inspired a program that more than 1,200 of the district's leading eighth graders have participated in, exploring the unique mid-Atlantic coastal region and its productive salt marshes, pristine barrier beaches and peaceful inland waters.

This month, Jarrett and science teacher Jacki Clymer, who took over the program's administrative duties following Jarrett's retirement in 2015, traveled



Strayer Middle School eighth-grade students lineup prior to their trip, and after experiencing life in Wallops Island, Va.



with 33 students and three chaperones to spend four days and three nights in what is described as a "hands-on, wet-feet education."

"It's four days of learning by being outdoors," Clymer said. "They're immersed with an appreciation for the outdoors, the marine environment, and their role in it."

Clymer smiles when she talks about how students "see the connections between what they're learning here in Quakertown and what they learned on the trip. They're very proud of the fact that they know and can apply these new concepts, and I'm happy to see that."

"It isn't all just book stuff," Jarrett said.

Chaperone Audrey Fletcher, whose son Simon went on the trip, said "words honestly cannot describe what a powerful learning experience this was for

our students on so many levels; academically, socially and emotionally."

Fletcher wrote an email to Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner, Strayer Principal Derek Peiffer, and Vice Principal Jennifer Bubser that detailed the value of the students' participation and praised the "passion for science and leadership" of the teachers.

"They addressed issues with utmost care and professionalism, guided the students through rules and expectations and exhibited their wealth of knowledge by conversing with the students about their scientific learnings, further impressing upon them how exciting science can be," Fletcher stated in her email.

Students "participated wholeheartedly in the array of classroom, lab and hands-on activities and were literally

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beaming with interest and delight in each field trip and new experience. Before each excursion, the (field station) instructors would provide a 30-minute lesson about the natural resources they would be seeing and, before you know it, the bus would drop them off right into that environment. ...

"Our students kept a daily journal of their experiences, wrote and performed fun and relevant skits at the beach campfire and finished their binders with a personal testimonial relaying what they enjoyed about the trip and why," Fletcher's email continued.

"What they learned by living these experiences in four days could not be matched in a classroom and I am absolutely thrilled that Simon had this extraordinary opportunity. If he decides to major in marine biology someday, I will certainly know why!"

Only a select group of students get to go on the trip. Jarrett visited science classrooms to explain the trip and the application process. Students who exhibit a strong interest in science, a willingness to work hard and a cooperative spirit are selected to attend.

Clymer added she's seeking "a passion for learning and for science" in those students who apply.

"This was an excellent group," she said. "They were engaged the entire time."

Gary Weckselblatt, QCSD Director of Communications, writes about the people and the programs that impact the Quakertown Community School District. He can be reached at [215-529-2028](tel:215-529-2028) or gweckselblatt@qcsd.org.

