

RIVERSIDE EDUCATIONAL CENTER

PROVIDING STUDENTS A
“SECOND” OUTDOOR FAMILY

Words by Kristen Lummis | Photos by Jill Waugh



When Edgar Corona began attending the Riverside Educational Center (REC) after-school program in fifth grade, he figured he'd work on homework, have a snack and hang out with friends.

“I didn't know REC did outdoor programming,” he explains, adding that until he went rafting with REC before sixth grade, his outdoor experience was limited to hunting, fishing and biking.

Now a student at Colorado Mesa University (CMU), Corona credits his adventures with REC for broadening his horizons.

“My experiences with REC — rafting, rock climbing and camping — sparked a fire for the outdoors in me,” he shares, admitting to thoughts of working as a summer river guide when he's not busy with pre-med homework.

“Much of what we do at REC, but especially rafting, is very team-based,” he continues,

reflecting from his position as a REC youth leader, a role he took on in high school.

“There are so many life skills we learn: patience, persistence and enjoying little things like admiring the view.”

OUTDOORS + EDUCATION

The benefits of outdoor education, for individuals and groups of kids, are well-known and largely indisputable.

“The outdoors is such a good vessel for budding teens,” explains Jack Curry, who is both REC's outdoor program coordinator and middle school coordinator. “It helps teens learn to challenge themselves and build confidence.”

“The outdoors also provides immediate consequences. If you don't zip your tent, you have consequences. If you don't pack enough water, there are consequences. The outdoors teaches cause and effect and responsibility.”

Greg Weckenbrock, the director of the Mesa County Valley School District's Outdoor Wilderness Lab (OWL) agrees, sharing that "meaningful experiences in the outdoors create physical and mental benefits that help us grow as people."

Now in its seventh year, OWL has expanded from Bookcliff Middle School to a campus in Gateway, with the ability to provide every sixth grader in the school district a two-and-a-half-day camp.

Like REC with its Youth Leader Program, Weckenbrock believes in utilizing older students as mentors. In his case, students who complete an outdoor leadership development class at Central High School can be hired as camp counselors in Gateway.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

In addition to linking together older and younger students, REC finds that community partnerships are critical to outdoor education success.

For REC, partners such as the Colorado West Land Trust, Colorado Canyons Association, Museum of the West, Rivers Edge West, the Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief and Grand Junction Parks and Recreation have created opportunities for everything from river rafting to sustainable farming, from native plant restoration to backpacking.

"It was important to identify partners who were already doing these outdoor activities," says Joy Hudak, REC's executive director. "We didn't want to reinvent other efforts and expertise."

Additional partners include individual donors, the City of Grand Junction (via a Community Development Block Grant) and the Grand Junction Lions Club, all of whom have funded REC's acquisition of eight used buses to transport students on outdoor adventures.

One of REC's newest partners is The Cycle Effect, a nonprofit focused on empowering girls and young women through mountain biking. Based in Eagle, The Cycle Effect expanded to Mesa County in early 2020 and REC students signed up to ride.

This summer, with many of REC's outdoor plans curtailed due to social distancing, meeting up with The Cycle Effect to ride and explore the



new Dos Rios Bike Park has been a highlight for students. It's also a free activity that allows Curry the opportunity to roll out the student-use bike fleet he has been building since 2019.

A SECOND FAMILY

For middle school students who have been out of school and missing friends since mid-March, the ability to meet up once a week at the bike park and the nearby Las Colonias waterpark has made this very odd summer more familiar.

Daniel, one of triplets who has been attending, explains that he goes to REC programming "because it gets you outside and it's a fun way to exercise."

In addition to shouting out the rock climbing, camping and rafting the siblings have enjoyed in previous years, Daniel's sisters Angle and Caitlynn agree that REC is like a "second family" to them.

"I have learned that REC is always there and they will listen to you when you need someone to talk to," Caitlynn elaborates.

Like Corona, Rosa Rodriguez, a REC youth leader who is now at CMU, credits REC with introducing her to new outdoor activities. "REC is the reason these are my favorite things to do now," she says.

For Rodriguez, the benefits have been more than just creating an affinity for rafting and camping.

"I have always had this thing about sweet serenity," she shares. "And every time I think of that phrase, I think of rafting. Feeling at home in the outdoors gives me a sense of freedom." +