

## **How I heard about the Teaching Drum Outdoor School**

It was sometime in 2001 that I first saw the advertisement for the Teaching Drum Outdoor School, in Wilderness Way magazine. It seemed like a very intriguing school. However, there were some big obstacles to overcome before I could attend the school. For one thing, the tuition was \$3600.00 plus expenses. I really wanted to go, but I just didn't have the money. Plus, I would have to solve several other problems. They included finding a home for my dog, storing my stuff, and making sure all my bills were paid. I would also have to get from Tennessee to Wisconsin.

I mentioned the idea to a few people. Not many were very encouraging. They thought it was impractical, foolish, and just plain crazy. (Well, people can think what they want.) I kept pondering the thought of going, but my hopes weren't too high.

Then in the early summer of '02, I got a letter from Bob G., whom I'd met while taking a course at the Boulder Outdoor Survival School (B.O.S.S.) a couple years earlier. He was participating in the 'year long' program at the Teaching Drum Outdoor School, and suggested that I come up later in the year for a visit. I think that was just the encouragement that I needed to step it up a notch. Between my desire to go and the invitation to come, the possibility of me participating in the 'year long' program was greatly improving.

I wrote a letter to the school to get the information packet. Then I called to make plans for a visit. Things were falling into place. I just needed to get time off work and fly up to Wisconsin for a few days to meet the staff and check the place out.

## **Visiting the Teaching Drum Outdoor School**

I was anxious and excited about going to Wisconsin and was up late getting ready. I went over my packing list several times to make sure I had everything I needed. Then, after I got my bundles in the car, I went to get my friend Rowdy out of bed. He wanted to borrow my car while I was gone, so he had to come to the airport with me. About an hour later, I was winging my way to Wisconsin.

Bob was there to pick me up shortly after I arrived at the tiny airport in Rhinelander. I saw him come in but didn't recognize him until after he spoke. With the beard, he had that look that Seekers

have at the Teaching Drum; rugged and woodsy. A few minutes later we had my stuff in the van and were heading down the road.

The Teaching Drum Outdoor School is on the edge of the Nicolet National Forest. As we turned into the driveway, a rustic scene stretched out before me. Near the sign at the entrance with the school's name, was a wigwam and deer hide in a rack. On one side of the lot were two cabins. One was the office and library, the other was the Seekers Cabin, it was a place where the participants in the program stored their stuff. They also slept there during their monthly visits to the Center. On the other side of the sandy parking area was Tamarack's house. Next to it was another little building called The Shoe House, because it resembled a shoe. Then there was the storage/work shed that had evidence of much activity.

Two majestic pines stood in the middle of the lot, which was surrounded by grass that is allowed to grow as it would in its natural habitat. The whole place had an air of the ruggedness that felt wild and free. In the Ojibwa language, it is called "Nad'mad'ewining", which means "place of support".

One of the first things I had to do was sign a release form. It basically stated that if I hurt myself, it was my responsibility and not the school's. After that, I met a few people and had a look around the place. Then, Bob and I got some food and water packed up to take out to camp. Participants in the program, or 'Seekers' as they are called, can drink wild water right from the lake. Guests need to drink 'civilized' water from the well, which is brought out to camp from the Center. With all that taken care of, we headed out to Nishnajida, which means, 'camp returning to the old way'.

It was about five miles to the small parking area at the trail head on Woodbury Lake Road. There were a few houses along the road near the Center, but out near camp there was nothing but trees and bogs for miles on either side of the sandy gravel road. After we got my gear and the supplies, we headed down the trail for the last leg of my journey; the hike to Nishnajida.

The trail wound its way through a maple forest, before winding its way through stands of tall pines. We passed a couple of small bogs and traversed some log foot bridges. The trail seemed to be a mile long, but I think it was only a quarter of that.

As we journeyed, we came into a small clearing on the sunny side of a hill. There was a small lean-to and a birch bark covered lodge called a wigwam. Later I discovered that there was also an earth lodge

there, but it was hidden under a cover of foliage. This was winter camp.

As we were dropping off the food and water I met Jason, one of Bob's fellow Seekers. Then Bob took me on a tour to show me the rest of the place. We went over the hill to summer camp. It was there that I found a nice spot to put up my tent. I left my stuff and we headed down the path to the hide tanning area. Luke was there working on a hide. He was very fashionable, with his boxer shorts and a black plastic bag tied on like an apron. The swim area was a little further down the path. It is a nice place to take a bath, get a drink, or sit and watch the sunset. On our way back we went past the Sweat Lodge, which is a low domed earth lodge structure used for ceremonially sweats. Then we followed a path between two small hills that lead us back to summer camp.

Summer camp was an open breezy place close to the lake. There were three small wigwams and a large one set up around the edge of the area. The small bark covered lodges were for sleeping and storage. The large one, with its shaggy grass thatch skirting, was called the 'Wooly Mammoth'. It was used for meetings and other gatherings if it happened to be raining.

Later on, Luke took me to my da'i area. Everyone has their own spot to go to when they need to relieve themselves. It is an area some distance from camp where one can have privacy. Guests, I found out, don't need to go too far off, but Seekers must hike ten or fifteen minutes from camp to their place. Mine was toward the Moon Lodge, which was just a short walk from summer camp. Now, the Moon Lodge is where women go during their monthly cycle for one to three days to take care of themselves.

The two camps (a total of five people) were in the process of combining. Luke had already relocated to the Wabanon (east camp) and Bob was in the process of moving over. I helped him bring the rest of his belongings across the lake from Niingabian (west camp). I used the 16 foot canoe, which they call the 'Tin Can', to bring the big things and Bob loaded the smaller items in his 12 foot solo.

During that trip is when I met the women; Mari and Loraine. I guess they were happy where they were. They did not relocate to Wabanon while I was there. I don't know if they ever did. I later found out that, when the year started, there were thirteen Seekers. But at the end, there would only be two; Bob and Jason.

I got a good taste of camp life, though it may have been limited. Some of the things I did learn about were rock tri-pods for cooking, bark and bough covering for lodge floors, roasted nuts, and the most important, the Talking Circle. I also learned that ‘The Talking Circle’, along with ‘Truth Speaking’, are important aspects of life at Nishnajida.

I have participated in Talking Circles while at B.O.S.S., but this time it was different. There were some issues and feelings that needed to be expressed. I joined in, and was able to share a few things from an outsider’s point of view. I have shared in many Talking Circles since, and must say, it is a wonderful tool.

I must add a little note on Truthspeaking. The best way I have is to quote Tamarack Song’s article; ‘Speech is Sacred: The Way of Truthspeaking’. “When we are in the now, feeling emanates from us as clearly as does the warmth and crackle of a campfire. At the same time, we can sense just as clearly the feelings of others who are in the now. This is true emotional health – the lean, clean, and immediate flow of feeling. It leaves no pent-up or reactive feeling in its wake, and thereby no frustration, depression, or loss of self-esteem. There is no leftover garbage to tote into the next moment, so there’s nothing that needs to be vented or worked out later. Each moment, each sharing, cleanses itself. That is dwelling fully in the now – that is the soul of Truthspeaking.” It takes a whole book to say what truth speaking is and how to practice it. I recommend learning about it.



Me, chillin’ at camp and making some string.

I had a fun stay at camp and had some good experiences. I played around on the lake, helped tote and burn old cedar boughs from the

lean-to, and went for a few hikes. One afternoon I helped dismantle a summer lodge that needed to be rebuilt. Later in that day, Luke and I went down to jump in the lake. He said something like, 'You don't mind if I go skinny dipping, do you? We do that here. But we need to be sensitive to our guests.' I said I didn't mind because that is what I was going to do. Then, on the way back to the lodge we saw some florescent fungi on a log. I looked for it during my 'year long', but never found any.

That week must have been around the time of the new moon, because it was very dark in the woods. Bob had to lead me back to my tent one evening, because I could not see my hand in front of my face. It was slow going but I got to my tent safely. It felt really strange being such a distance from the other camp and all alone in the pitch black night. I wasn't scared. It just felt strange.

## **The Sign in the Sky**

The evening before I left, I went out on the lake with Bob for one more canoe ride. The water was like a mirror. It reflected the overcast sky so well, that I couldn't see the water for the image reflected in it. It felt like I was flying. It was a pleasant time to be on the water. When I got back, I took down my tent and packed up my stuff. I would be sleeping in the lean-to, because I needed to leave early in the morning to catch my flight home.

The sky remained cloud covered all night. By morning it was like a smooth gray blanket covering the heavens. As I sat there getting dressed, I happened to look up. That's when I saw the image in the clouds. I don't remember the feeling I had, if any. It was a strange moment. I just sat there looking at the sky above the clearing. There in the clouds, was a circle with a detailed image of a fetus in it. I could see fingers and toes. It even had a little tuft of hair that curled back. The arms and legs were bent at ninety degrees and in the correct proportion to the body. I could see the eyes, nose, and mouth. Furthermore, it was facing east. I sat there for several minutes, just watching. I never thought to call out to the others or take a picture. I just watched. Soon the others started getting up, but by that time the image had drifted off to the side. It was still visible, but I never said anything. I felt I shouldn't. Later, I realized that if I had taken a picture, people may not have believed it was real. They may have thought it was digital trickery. To me, the image was 'a sign of new

beginnings'. It was very special, even sacred. It would be wrong for me to subject it to scoffing.

### **Going Home**

After bidding Jason and Luke farewell, Bob and I headed down the trail. I got to the airport on time and had an interesting flight home in a small turbo-jet. I had to pee, and because of the turbulence, the aircraft was bouncing around. That made it quite a challenge to get to the restroom. The good news is that I successfully accomplished my task. The rest of the flight went well.

When I got back to the airport in Tennessee, I couldn't find my car. Rowdy was supposed to leave it in the long term parking area, but he didn't. I had to make a few phone calls and wait for a ride. After an hour or so, I was driving home. I was tired. It was time to rest.

### **New Beginnings**

After that visit and seeing the sign, my life took a turn. I see most of the events and changes in retrospect. It is too easy to 'make' things happen and say it was because of the sign. But to look back and see what did happen; to me it is more amazing, and more authentic.

There were several changes that took place. My purpose and goals for life changed. I now had a plan and something to work toward. I changed churches. I felt I was in a rut and needed a fresh start. There were other changes that I won't list here, but they were all good.

I also learned what I call 'Duck Medicine'. I shall explain. Some people's behavior seemed to make me really angry. I would become enraged. It was frightening, because I never knew if I was going to hurt someone. I didn't like that aspect of myself at all.

Then one day I had an incident at work. I became furious at a fellow employee. I realized right then that I could not continue to let things like that happen to me. It was as if I gave people the power to make me mad. So, I took my power back. From then on, the other person was free to be what and who they were. I 'became a duck' and they 'became water'. Their issue would just roll off my back like water. It would have no influence on me. As a result, I felt an inner peace that I had not felt in a long time.

There is another duck/water relationship. That is when a duck is swimming on the pond. It is a relationship of harmony and balance. The two can co-exist together without changing the essence of the

other. This is not a new concept. I have read about it in books by other names, but I kind of like the name, 'Duck Medicine'.

### **Preparations before Attending the T.D.O.S.**

After my visit, I felt that the Teaching Drum Outdoor School was where I needed to be. I have taken survival course and other wilderness skill classes in the past, but they were mere workshops compared to this course. Yet they prepared me, at least in part, for the Teaching Drum's 'year long' program. So, I sent for an application and information about the school. I needed to find out what it would take to become a participant.

I felt a bit of stress building up in me. I found out that the tuition was not \$3600,00, but \$5100.00. Furthermore, I had less than \$1000.00 in the bank. I would have to rent or buy a canoe at the school. I needed wool clothing, blankets, and foot wear. Then, I would have to get to Three Lakes with all my stuff. But, before I could leave, I would have to have all my bills paid off. The days were slipping by and the dead-line for sending in the application was drawing near. It was then that I realized that I needed to take a deep breath, relax, and set my sights on '04. There was just no way that I would be ready to go by April of '03.

Now the goal was more easily attainable with about 18 months to prepare. I could easily get everything on the gear list, or at least try. I estimated how much money I might need and calculated how much I would have to save each month. I also realized that I should save some cash to last for a couple months after the 'year long'. I figured that I should have \$10,000.00 in the bank by the time I quit both of my jobs. I must say here, that I reached my goal and passed it by eight dollars.

I read through the book: 'Journey to the Ancestral Self', and some other writings by Tamarack Song to get a handle on some of ideas and exercises that we would be doing. However, there were a lot of things that would not be learned until they became evident at camp. I just knew I was in for an adventure, and I was excited.

I told "everybody" what I was planning to do. Most people were encouraging, and a few wondered why, but two were opposed to my going. I guess people can think what they want. I knew what I had to do. This was an opportunity of a lifetime and the time was right. I felt

that I was meant to take this journey; this quest. Things were fitting into place. I just needed to get there.

I sent in the application early. I didn't want to wait too long. I told my employer what I had initiated. They didn't want me to go, because my position (the night shift) was hard to fill. However they were supportive. They kept asking, "When are you leaving?", and I would say, "I haven't heard from the school yet." I couldn't speak in the affirmative until I got the official notice from the Teaching Drum. Then one day I announced, "I'm in!" The count down began. One day toward the end of my employment, a fellow employee said, to the manager, "Don't let him go!" I would be missed. That felt good.

## **The Days Before My Departure**

There were some tasks I had to do before I departed for the woods. I had to figure out what to do with all my possessions. They had to be stored, given away, trashed, or sold. Plus, there were many people to visit before going away. I could only take two bags on the airplane, so I had to ship several boxes of gear. Then I had to cancel phone and internet service, close my P.O. Box, and finalize my car insurance. Then, a very important job, I had to find a home for Mender, my dog. It was a busy and emotional time.

As I packed up the things I wanted to keep, I put them in boxes lined with plastic bags. Moth balls were added to deter ants from making nests and the seams were taped for added protection. My shed is only 7x7 feet, so I only stored items that I really wanted.

I took a box of give-away things to work on a couple occasions. I found takers for a number of things. The easiest time was when I took the box of videos and CD's. I only got a few feet inside the door before they were all gone. It's a wonder I didn't lose a hand in the process. I could have sold them, but I was in a give-away mood.

The Thrift Store got a few boxes of stuff. I just didn't want to be bothered with trying to get rid of it all myself, besides they were always in need of 'new' merchandise. I often took things there that I didn't need any more.

As for junk, it went straight into the dumpster. No messing around. That is all I need to say about that.

There were several people that I needed to visit. It took some doing to connect with everyone that I wanted to see. I never knew when they might be home. A couple times I was invited for dinner, and

other times I went out to eat with someone. I gave each of them a copy of the 'Friends and Family' letter, provided by the school, that explained what I was about to participate in. I also included my address so they could write to me. I wanted to have all the emotional support I could get in case things got difficult in the woods.

I also sent e-mails and snail-mails to friends and family members to let them know when I was going off line. I was getting greedy. I wanted lots of letters from everybody. I guess some people don't know how to write letters because I never heard from them. On the other hand, I did get quite a bit of mail. There were only a few mail drops when I didn't get a letter.

There was a bunch of stuff that I needed to ship because it would cost BIG BUCKS to take it all on the plane. I ended up mailing five large packages via UPS. I saved a lot of money and all my packages arrived in good order.

While most things, like closing accounts, went well. There was one thing that was hard. I had to find a home for my dog. I asked around but no one was willing or able to take her. One thing was for sure, I was not taking her to the Pound. I could not do such a mean thing as that. I asked at the Veterinarian Office about finding her a home and they referred me to the T.C.G.C. Animal League. I called them and they weren't sure if they had room to board another dog, but in the end they were able to take her. I collected her things and wrote a letter about what she was like, her habits, and her diet. I also explained her name: Mender. She was a black-lab mix with a white patch on her chest. My thought was, if she had a patch, someone must have had to 'mend her'. I never found out what happened to her. I hope she got a good home.

The days slipped by and my last night at work arrived. It seemed no different than any other night. But in the morning when I walked out, it felt strange knowing that I was not coming back to clean those floors anymore. I would be back a couple times to eat and pick up one more check, but I would be there only as a customer and not an employee.

## **Surprise Party**

With only a few days to go, my friend Mike took me out to dinner and a couple other places. As I write this, I can't remember the name of the restaurant, but the food was good. Then we visited Bristol

Caverns and went on the tour. I enjoy going into caves because it's "other worldliness". Much like going to live in a primitive camp is a different world from what I was familiar with.

After that, we went to Warriors Path State Park. We hiked up to the overlook on the bluff where I often went to sit and 'send up smoke'. The little medicine wheel that I had carved in the ground was still there. I carved it anew and wondered if I would be able find it after a year.

Then, Mike wanted to go over to the Rec. Center to play ping pong. At that hour I didn't think the place would be open. Yet, the doors were open and I had a 'What are you doing?' kind of feeling. He walked in like he owned the place, and the lady behind the counter didn't say anything. He headed for the conference room and went in. As I came through the door, I just stood there with my mouth hanging open. *It was a surprise party for me!* I don't know how long I stood there, but it seemed like a long time. I finally started to mingle. A couple of the attendees wondered how I managed not to find out about the party, because when I went to visit them, the invitations were in plain sight. For some reason, I just never saw them.

They had a gift for me. It was a little photo album with short letters and comments from people that I knew. They wrote some thoughts and memories they had about me. The gift was very special and it made me get all misty eyed. I couldn't read it then. I had to wait till I got home.

Simeon J. was unable to attend, but I got to hear the voice mail he left on his mom's phone. That was nice.

Before we ate, they all gathered around and prayed for me. Then we talked and had a good time. It was a very nice send off. I enjoyed myself very much. Thanks to all who made it happen.

## **The Day of Departure**

I was up very early. My flight left around 7:30 or 8:00 am and I needed to be at the airport about an hour ahead of time. Mike drove me to the Tri-Cities Airport. But first, we went out to breakfast. Michael B. and Chris W. met us at the local 24 hour restaurant.

After a nice breakfast, we left for the airport. Mike and Chris only went as far as the security check point. With a hug and a 'See you later.' I got checked in and headed to the gate. My adventure had begun; I was going to the Teaching Drum Outdoor School at last.



Me, Chris, Mike, and Michael, as we enjoyed a lovely breakfast.



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Me at the airport.