

MOVE ON TO TRAILBLAZERS

I have had the privilege of participating in the Prairie Trail Federation for 13 years. I have been a tribal chief, the honor points chief and Trailblazer Nation Chief. As a result I have met many other involved dads who have devoted time and effort to the program, but more importantly, who have spent significant time with their children. Collecting honor points information from hundreds of tribal chiefs over nine years gave me familiarity with the names of many families who enjoyed the experiences offered by our program.

I recently attended commencement exercises at Lyons Township High School as a proud father of a graduate. Leafing through the program, I recognized many of the names of the graduates identified as recipients of academic awards, service awards, honor society recognition and scholarships. As I listened to the names of the graduates called to receive their diplomas, it seemed as if I knew nearly half of the names. Boblick, Foody, Kepich, Krivicich, Polega, Hasiakos, Petrini, Sedlack, McCarty, Lorenzen, McMurray, Rocco, on and on and on. These were the names of families with whom I had crossed paths in one way or another through the Prairie Trail Federation. It was incredible to me how many names called were those of prior tribal chiefs, nation chiefs, volunteers at our events, Pinewood Derby participants or dads met at the many campouts along the way.

I was first struck by the thought of how thoroughly our program has permeated the community and how valuable it is to the community. But on further reflection, I had some different thoughts. High School graduation marks a time when our children take a step into the adult world and start to build their own lives. Because the kids with the names I remembered had grown up with a father who was engaged in their lives and made a point to spend time with them, I couldn't help but think these kids were better prepared to start that journey. The Indian Guides, Indian Princesses and Trailblazers were formed by a man who believed that American dads too often served primarily as breadwinners and disciplinarians, and left most of the child rearing to mothers. By creating opportunities for dads to spend time with their kids, and with other dads, he hoped to improve the quality of the relationship of fathers with children, and create lasting bonds that would bridge the gap between generations that can sometimes arise in families.

President Obama recently spoke on the importance of fathers in the lives of our children. He said wisely that "Fathers are our first teachers and coaches, they're our mentors and role models, they, set an example of success and push us to succeed." The Prairie Trail Federation has been pursuing that mission for many years.

That mission does not end when our children reach fourth or fifth grade and pass from the Guides and Princesses. Trailblazers offers the opportunity to continue father-child activities on your own schedule with events that are designed to appeal to pre-teens and teens. Kids at these ages need their fathers' involvement even more, and we need to spend time with them one on one, outside the scramble of running from one junior high or high school event to another. It may seem that Trailblazers is one more program to sign up for and one more complication for already crammed schedules. But it really represents an escape from the music, sports, theater, club and school activities that dominate this time in their lives, to get back to the basics of hanging with dad and maybe trying things they haven't had time to experience before. Plus, it allows the kids to keep the core of their Princess or Guide friends together as they move on to more challenging activities. We don't organize into tribes with monthly meetings. The informal structure lets you and your group select those events that you will enjoy most. And this year, we have decided that there will be **NO REGISTRATION FEE** to join Trailblazers. You will pay only for the events you choose, priced at their actual cost.

A typical Trailblazer campout is similar to Guides and Princesses because it is based at a camp with group meals and available camp activities. But they are also very different since they are co-ed and many of the available activities are outside the camp. The fall campout features a canoe trip on the Tippecanoe River, 9 holes of golf on a local course and often includes a trip to Monticello for go-carts, mini-golf and movies. The spring campout offers a paddle-wheel boat ride, paintball, horseback riding, swimming, and wally-ball as planned activities with options for auto-racing, bowling, laser tag and movies. Our new winter campout format is a weekend at condos in the Wilderness Lodge at Wisconsin Dells, including skiing, tubing, water park fun and games, and a pizza party. In addition to campouts, we also typically arrange for a paintball excursion, snow skiing trip and whirlyball. Events are ala carte, allowing for the kids to participate in the events that they find most appealing.

But let's be selfish for a moment. Think of how our lives have been enhanced by the time spent with our children. Whether it is doing the egg-toss at a campout, seeing them interact with nature on the many trails we have hiked, watching them give their all in a tribal cheer, giving your daughter her first dance at a daddy-daughter dance, holding hands at the campout ceremonies, working together on a community service project, watching the kids master the snowboards at Cascade Mountain, or having an unexpectedly mature conversation during a Trailblazer canoe ride, these are the experiences we will never forget and which help us to know our children better. As I watched my son graduate and prepare to send him off to college, I am not focusing on any regrets over not spending enough time with him, but rather am grateful for the opportunity we have had through Federation activities, and confident that he will take with him our family's and community's values.

I can't draw a direct connection between Indian Guides, Princesses and Trailblazers and earning high school awards or scholarships. But I have no doubt that both child and father are better prepared for the next phase of their lives, and have a better chance at maintaining a close lasting bond that will make their lives richer. If we look around, we can see the influence of the Great Spirit everywhere, even in the bleachers of a stuffy gymnasium during graduation exercises. How-How!

JOIN THE TRAILBLAZERS AT CAMP TECUMSEH FOR THE FALL CAMPOUT, ON A NEW EARLIER SCHEDULE, AUGUST 28-30. CANOEING, SWIMMING, GOLF AND MORE! FOR DETAILS, PLEASE SEE THE ENCLOSED FLYER, OR PRINT IT FROM OUR WEBSITE, www.yigp.org. CONTACT JOHN GOSIEWSKI, 111 DREXEL AVENUE, LAGRANGE, IL 60525, 708-482 7735, EMINENCE-FRONT@LYCOS.COM.