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## Boulder outdoorsman creates buzz with adventure program

**By Chris Barge, Camera Staff Writer  
December 21, 2003**

Last weekend, the winds reached 70 mph on St. Mary's Glacier. One student went home with altitude sickness. It was New Vista High School principal Rona Wilensky's idea of hell.



Carmel Zucker

Ford Church, right, goes over compass reading skills with New Vista High School student Noah Theeman-Lindberg during a meeting of the Community Adventure Program.

"God, it was so much fun," one of the students told Wilensky on Monday.

And that's why the principal knows that Ford Church's grand plan is working.

This summer, Church, 27, approached Wilensky about a vision he had for the Boulder Valley. He wanted to create a unique class for adventurous students to learn outdoor skills, discuss environmental issues and give back to their community in a creative way.

"The beauty of this class is that it's multidisciplinary," he said. "It's got environmental education, outdoor skills and service learning. Those are some pretty high-impact buzz words that make this program relevant."

He called his vision the Community Adventure Program. Wilensky decided he was on to something.

"When I met with Ford, it was clear to me he had a passion and a big vision for wilderness education," Wilensky said. "I thought maybe this is the spark we needed."

She signed him on to teach about 15 of her kids for an hour every Tuesday and Thursday and for the whole day each Wednesday. The class filled up.

Church took his kids camping outside Nederland last month. Then, last weekend, he took them winter camping on St. Mary's Glacier.

They learned to build a snow cave. They learned how to glissade with ice axes. They went sledding and cooked all their own meals.

Now there's a waiting list for his winter camping class at New Vista next quarter.

"It's really fun because we get to go camping," said Morgan Hayes, a 14-year-old freshman. "Ford is an awesome teacher, and he's lots of fun."

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It hasn't all been fun and games. The instructor laboriously planned the program as part of his graduate work in adventure education program management through Prescott College in Arizona. Through it all, he tried to figure out a way to incorporate a community service element that students would feel excited about completing.

"That's just ingrained in me from my parents and my grandparents," he said. "I wanted to bring my students' ideas of community service away from parole officers and into something they care about."

So while the full-day Wednesday classes and field trips and occasional weekend camping trips have focused on the "hard skills" of wilderness camping and the "soft skills" of leadership and environmental ethics, Church has directed the hourlong Tuesday and Thursday classes toward developing a community service project.

He wants his students to come up with their own "community action project." They're not sure yet what it will be. Some students have suggested composting the dog poop on the city's trails.

There's certainly a need for that. The city Open Space and Mountain Parks Department estimates that dogs leave 30 tons of poop on and near the trails each year. That's the same weight as 15 Ford Explorers.

Online, at [www.communityadventure.com](http://www.communityadventure.com), Church and his students are recording a virtual diary of their progress. The students have taken turns leaving "blogs" (short for Web logs) about what they've learned since the class started in October.

The Web site includes information about free classes around Boulder on snowshoeing and backcountry and avalanche awareness that Church recommends his students attend.

If things go well this year at New Vista, Church said he'd like to bring his program to other schools. Over the next five years, he wants to refine his curriculum to a point where he can train other coordinators.

"I think it has really sparked something in my son," said Jonathan Falk, who helped chaperone the camping trip on St. Mary's Glacier last weekend. "He's really fired up about the whole wilderness experience from this class. As a parent, to have your child grab hold of something you didn't force down their throat — it's really a treat to watch it happen."

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