

Wild inSights



MONICA NISSEN: EDUCATION PROGRAM MANAGER



Connecting kids with their wild surroundings

Have you ever found inspiration right in your own back yard? Wildsight's Education Program Manager Monica Nissen did – and it has lasted her a lifetime.

'I grew up in a small town outside Montréal, in a house with a big yard that backed onto a forest. I'm lucky that very early on, I was always very close to nature,' says Monica. 'Our family went camping whenever we could.'

In school, too, Monica's favourite experiences always involved going outdoors and being active. 'I was no good at gym, but I loved my school's extra-curricular Wilderness Awareness Program, where we went on multi-day canoeing and cross-country skiing trips. I found my world, my comfort zone, my people, my confidence and connection!'

Those early experiences made

a deep impression. 'On one camping trip, when I was a kid, we met some park naturalists on the summit of a mountain. They were studying alpine plants and teaching park visitors about ferns, turtles, and wolves. I decided right then and there that having a job like that would be the coolest thing ever!'

Monica has fond memories of her first job working outdoors and

with kids – what she considers a dream combination – as a summer camp counselor.

‘I realized there that so many kids really thrived in the outdoors and learned things about themselves that they might not have done in other settings – just like I did on those Wilderness Awareness Program trips! I loved working in a simple living setting, always in touch with nature around me.’

Monica’s passion took her to McGill University, where she studied geography – it’s no surprise that there, too, she loved the field trips! – and later on to the University of British Columbia, where she earned a Bachelor of Education. Now, as Education Program Manager, Monica continues to combine her love of nature with her passion for education.

‘The very best part of my job is actually delivering programs – being out there with the kids, watching ‘Aha!’ moments happen. I love helping and seeing kids discover, appreciate and enjoy nature. It’s magical.’

Managing Wildsight’s education programs is no small task – both field trip-based programs like Classroom With Outdoors and Winter Wonder and longer classroom-based programs like Beyond Recycling take a lot of time and energy to organize and fundraise for. All together, these programs get thousands of students in the East and West Kootenays out into nature every year – a truly remarkable feat! Monica takes pride in the

programs and the impact they make.

‘I’m proud of the fact that our programs continue to thrive. Classroom With Outdoors programs have been going on for 12 years! I’m proud of the fact that they’re still recognized, still loved and appreciated by students and teachers.’

Monica’s other favourite aspect of her work is collaborating with her team of outdoor educators. The group meets a few times each year to develop curriculum and update the programs.

‘I love working with our educators – they’re such a passionate and inspiring bunch! It’s fun to get together to share new ideas and activities, try out games and demonstrations together, and talk about what does and doesn’t work in the programs. The suggestions and insights that everyone brings are what help to make our programs so unique and in demand by teachers, students and parents.’

Much to her surprise, Monica’s work leading field trips has made her something of a local celebrity in her current hometown, Nelson.

‘When I lead Winter Wonder field trips, I dress up as Frosty Flake the Snowflake Fairy. And I guess it leaves an impression, because from time to time I’ll go to a meeting or to the grocery store and someone will say, ‘Hey, I know you, you’re the Snowflake Fairy!’ Dressing up in costume for work is fun, and of course the kids love it – but it’s good to know that

the parents who volunteer on our field trips love it too!’

Ideally, Monica would like to see the kind of experiences and information that Wildsight’s programs bring to students become standard curriculum throughout the school district – to have environmental education and ecological literacy be taught by the schools themselves.

What’s the most important message that Monica wants her students (and their teachers and parents) to learn?

‘Nature is not ‘out there’; it’s in us, and it’s part of everything we do – breathing, eating, drinking, working, playing ... I love David Suzuki’s ‘You Are the Earth’ book for kids – he presents so well the idea that we are all connected. If everyone could get that idea, we might all be closer together in terms of what we consider valuable.’

Monica is grateful that she gets to live and share her values every day through her work, and she makes sure to remind herself whenever she can of just what brought her there. Living in the mountains year-round, she takes advantage of opportunities to hike, bike, ski, and play.

‘Taking time to get into nature on my own is so helpful because I get caught up in the work of making these programs happen. It helps me to remember to make my own time for breathing fresh air and seeing a lot of green, living things around me – to go on adventures, get away from my desk and have balance in my everyday life.’

