As the embers wore down and the blue-tinged moon played peek-a-boo over our campfire, 41 middle school kids from West Marin School in Point Reyes Station were invited to look into the last campfire of our four-day-and-three-night sojourn at Clem Miller Environmental Education Center, located in Point Reyes National Seashore.

The kids were rapt and still. Eden Trenor, our campfire leader for the night, asked the children to choose something they were most grateful for from the visit, and to take home that reflection. Gratitude was a repeated theme and around the campfire that week I’d heard the students express many beautiful takeaways, any of which were worthy of carrying home:

“I’m grateful for the sunset we saw today on our way back from the beach.”

“I learned I’m friendlier when I don’t have my iPhone with me.”

“I’m thankful the good food, the kitchen volunteers, and all the people who spent time with us.”

“I learned I like to hike... especially the downhill parts.”

“I’m grateful to Clem Woodnutt Miller for starting this place.”

I also looked deep into the fire and gave thanks for the beautiful week I’d shared with the students, teachers, National Park Service staff, naturalists, and parent and community volunteers. Together, we created a magical week of learning, exploring, celebrating and community building. I wear a lot of hats in my life and this was one of those rare times when many of the roles I play came together naturally.

As a professional fundraiser I learn about and make possible many important programs but I rarely have the opportunity to personally deliver the goods. Through the new Seashore Youth Ambassadors project I’ve been fortunate to see this project through all of its stages. Last spring I collaborated with NPS Ranger Dale Dulan in writing a grant request to the National Park Foundation to fund a project aimed at connecting local youth, especially underserved and minority youth, to the wonders of their local national park.
A 2011 Obama administration report cited a key reason why young people feel uninclined to spend time exploring parks: they don’t have an adult to guide and inspire them. Our grant application to the National Park Foundation made the case that in spite of living so close to or within Point Reyes National Seashore, many of West Marin’s young people don’t know very much about the park. While some spend a lot of time exploring the park with their families, others, because their parents are working multiple jobs, don’t have an adult to help them explore and enjoy the outdoors. With a student population that is 56% Latino, many of whom are first-generation immigrants, and with 61% of all students qualifying for a free lunch, West Marin School in Point Reyes Station met the grant criteria of an underserved school.

Over the summer PRNSA and the National Seashore partnered with the Tomales Bay Youth Center to host four excursions for teens and their families. “These were good ice breakers for the youth and the park staff,” reflected Jamie Shulander, the Seashore Youth Ambassador project coordinator. Jamie is an experienced wilderness guide and artist, and she worked with West Marin School staff, park staff, naturalists and parents to integrate all of the aspects of this new project.

In the fall we collaborated with West Marin School to bring the entire middle school on a special camping trip. From November 4th through 7th, Point Reyes National Seashore Association and the National Park Service hosted the school’s 6th, 7th, and 8th graders for four days of fun and learning at the Clem Miller Environmental Education Center, the PRNSA-run 80-bed environmental education center located off Limantour Road. It is also where PRNSA runs an award-winning summer camp. During the rest of the year the space is used for a variety of educational programs through PRNSA’s Field Institute and by schools and other nonprofit groups, many of whom receive a scholarship to cover the rent of the space and transportation after participating in an environmental education training.

Nestled in a meadow in the National Seashore’s Phillip Burton Wilderness and outfitted with rustic open beam cedar cabins, a commercial kitchen, dining hall and natural history library, the Education Center was the perfect base camp for the trip. The cabins have no electricity and the teachers, to their credit, banned all electronic devices and cameras from the trip. The focus was on experiencing each moment, not recording it, except in the journal that each student received at the beginning of the trip.

As a parent of a 7th grader, I volunteered to co-anchor the kitchen duty management with parent Imelda Macias; that’s how this fundraiser was able to see the fruits of her labor. While the kids bonded with nature, park staff, naturalists and each other, parents worked and learned from each other. This group was well-fed on pozole, potato tacos, spaghetti Bolognese, salad made from the bounty of the school garden and other hand-crafted meals!

The field trip centered on fun,
interactive outdoor education led by naturalists and NPS staff representing a range of the park’s multiple specialty areas, along with free time to just play. Park Ranger John Eleby from the park’s Law Enforcement Division had the kids in stitches talking about search and rescue, including how not to get lost in the first place! He ended his session with a tug of war activity to demonstrate the strength of the rope and knots they had learned to tie. Park archeologist Paul Engel set up a mock excavation site for his workshop on ancient and modern history, while Amelia Ryan, a park plant specialist, led a botany walk on the Hidden Valley Trail. Rangers Loretta Farley and Doug Hee from the Interpretive Division focused on water conservation and water quality monitoring.

Naturalists and artists led activities ranging from animal tracking, botanical art, native skills, fire by friction, story telling, movement and safety while exploring the outdoors. Ecologist Meghan Walla-Murphy led an epic seven-mile hike to Sculptured Beach where the kids met park wildlife ecologist Dave Press, who led a tidepooling monitoring project with PRNSA-funded science educator Leslie Alder-Ivanbrook. The return trip to camp included a show-stopping sunset. A cornerstone of the each day was “sit spot” time where each child returned to a place of his or her choosing and relaxed, observed, and wrote or sketched in their journal.

Park Superintendent Cicely Muldoon spoke with the students over lunch about the different parks where she has worked. “All national parks belong to each of you,” she said. Her key message was that she hoped each of the students would come back to and explore the Point Reyes National Seashore and that this treasured place would be here for their children and their grandchildren because it was set aside for a special purpose. Another message throughout the trip was there are many career paths in the NPS and conservation fields.

While this field trip focused on the natural and cultural resources located near the Education Center, as part of our grant we will organize additional programming for local youth, including a trip to learn about ranching and the park’s unique pastoral zone thanks to the support of rancher and school board member Tim Kehoe and the park’s rangeland ecologists. The possibilities of our local national park as an outdoor classroom are limitless and we intend to continue the exploration and the fun in the coming months and years.