

County Faces



By Gloria Austin
Staff Writer

He may have grown up in Boothbay Harbor, but **Dave Conley** is a perfect match for northern Maine.

"My parents owned and operated a landscaping and retail garden center," he said. "I hauled lobster traps during my high school years and really enjoyed spending time on the water."

In 1986, Conley visited the East Grand area and like a magnet was pulled to northern Maine and its outdoor recreation opportunities.

The first canoe trip for Conley was on the Allagash Wilderness Waterway in 1987.

"I again was drawn by Aroostook County's woods, lakes and rivers," he said. "I really appreciated these areas and didn't miss the crowds and traffic jams of midcoast Maine in the summer months."

With the richness of Aroostook County calling him, Conley developed a wilderness adventure program with Camp Living Waters in Weston during the late '80s.

"This allowed me to combine my love of the outdoors with introducing others to what I enjoyed so much, northern Maine and its wild places and one who made it all," he said.

Conley's adventuresome side discovered him exploring and leading trips in the Allagash, along with the East and West branches of the Penobscot River, St. Croix, Machias and St. John River, as well as the Debsconeag Lakes, the Appalachian Trail and numerous other spots in the northern and eastern Maine.

But Conley didn't stop there.

"My explorations took me to eastern Canada guiding canoe trips on the de Pas (trophy Brook Trout trip), NE Mistissibi, Nipisiquit, Asuapmushuan, Moisie and Bonaventure rivers in the mid-1990s," he said.

During the late '90s, Conley took on another program, alongside the wilderness adventure program with Camp Living Waters.

"I helped out with the East Grand High School Outdoor Education program," he explained.

Houlton's Todd Willard was the physical education teacher at East Grand School, and initially started the Outdoor Education Program.

"When Todd left to take a teaching job at Houlton High School, I got involved (off and on during the early years) assisting physical education teachers," said Conley. "And, I have become more active with the program over the last eight or nine years."

The East Grand Outdoor Education Program has become a passion for Conley and those who help. The first few years were tough with lack of funding and support. But, in the last seven years, the program has become more stable and is actually expanding.

"We have had excellent physical education teachers to team teach, and financial support from the town of Danforth, First Wind and other organizations," he said.

The Outdoor Education class is currently being taught by Jeremy Durost and Conley as an optional class students

can take for credit.

"We utilize recreation as a tool for promoting personal growth, teamwork and imparting skills such as map and compass, trip planning and proficiency in handling a canoe, resulting in increased self confidence," Conley said. "You just see students' confidence grow as they take on new challenges and succeed. I often hear from parents what a difference the program has made in the life of their son or daughter. The program's mission statement is 'Promoting leadership development, teamwork, trust and physical fitness while gaining an appreciation for the outdoors and all that it has to offer!'"

Each year the students plan and take part in three overnight outings, teen conferences, spring canoe races including the Kenduskeag, Machias and Houlton's Meduxnekeag canoe races and in their own East Grand Adventure Race. East Grand students have also taken an active role in teaching. Students often instruct their peers in East Grand's outdoor education class, after-school programs, at the biannual Teens to Trails conference at Windham High School (www.teensto-trails.org) and in other schools including Hodgdon, Southern Aroostook, Topsfield and Vanceboro.

"In fact, many of our students have helped plan for, pack and lead trips on the Saint Croix and Allagash Rivers for some of these schools," said Conley. "Last year, 15 of our high school students took part in Hodgdon's Health Fair; students teaching students outdoor skills."

Not only does Conley have a passion for the outdoor education class, he has also been part of Living Waters (www.lwwcamp.com) in Weston for the last 22 summers.

"Last summer there were close to 200 participants, ages 10-74, taking part on 16 outings in Maine and Canada," he said. "I am taking a break this summer to let others run with the program while I pursue more through my Canoe the Wild business. It's one of those things you know in your heart, it is time to take a break and let others run with the program. We have placed a lot of emphasis on a team approach to leadership over the years in training and bringing up leaders through the program, so things should go just fine this summer. It's really how a program grows and expands when it is built around a team of people and not just by one person."

Conley holds a Maine Guide's license in the areas of fishing, hunting and recreation.

"I have become a master Maine Guide in recreation," he said. "Most recently, I changed my business title from Dave's Guide Service to Canoe the Wild (www.canoethewild.com) as guided canoe trips is a big part of what I do."

Last fall, while guiding two hunts for bull moose, both hunters bagged their trophies.

"The emphasis is put on lots of time into the pre-season scouting, finding the moose then spending time in these areas hunting from ground blinds or stands, using cover and attractant scents, calling and brush thrashing," he said.

Conley loves guiding and paddling, but he also needed an income through the slower times of November and December. So, he started another business venture 20 years ago ... Dave's Maine Wreaths and Trees.

"While guiding can produce good income, it's one of those occupations that you don't want to quit your day job since it is seasonal and has its slow times. One of these down times is the end of November through Christmas."

Conley's retail Christmas tree and wreath business has two retail locations in central Virginia.

"It started with selling 1,000 wreaths the first year and at its height, retailed 2,700 trees (three trailer truck loads) and 3,500 wreaths in a season," he said. "It's this seasonal income that has allowed me a flexible schedule to oversee the summer camp wilderness program and work part-time with the East Grand School's outdoor education program."

"There is an old saying ... find something you love to do and you'll never work a day in your life. I really have (and continue to) love what I do and have reaped a lot of satisfaction from seeing others benefit from these outdoor experiences."

Dave Conley is featured in the April 21st, 2010 Issues of The Star-Herald, the Houlton Pioneer Times & the Aroostook Republican and News.