



Alex

Half-way through the second semester, Alex wants to join the Laboratory School - or as the learners there call it, The Wilds. She's coming to shadow for a day, to see if this learning environment fits her needs. When she arrives 15 minutes before school starts, many of the other learners have already arrived. The lawn in front of the school is soggy with the melting winter, and robins graze feverishly on the earthworms bubbling up to the surface. She treks over to the garden to see what the other kids are doing: their fingers are dirty from digging up the soil; they've been working alongside Farmer Jessie, preparing the beds for planting garlic. One of the boys greets Alex, telling her he's been working with Jessie and a few local restaurants to find a market for "garden weeds" like purslane and lamb's quarters. He takes Alex to the bed that he began cultivating last spring when he started as a sixth grader. At the head of his bed is a wood burned image of Emerson, beneath which reads: "What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered." About half of the food is used in the school's kitchen and the other half, dandelion roots, mullein flowers, galinsoga leaves, he's been selling; the proceeds are part of a fundraiser to build a new garden storage shed.

A bunch of younger kids from the Field School have gathered around a picnic table nearby where Mo, one of the mentors, is showing them a road kill squirrel he and Dana found on the drive in. Like many of the kids and staff, Dana, an 8th grader, and Mo carpool to school together. Seth, one of the 6th graders, shows Alex the hand warmer they made out of a squirrel they found last year at the Field School. They worked with Mo to skin it and tan the hide. One of the middle school Facilitators

comes over, and lets Alex and Seth know the middle schoolers are gathering by the garden to start the day. Mo and the other Field Schoolers head off towards the edge of the woods to start their day.

The day from Alex's perspective

Welcome

The 25 middle schoolers have all arrived by now and stand in a circle alongside the 4 Facilitators, Farmer Jessie, a few college-aged students, and a couple of parents. "*Birch?*" one of the Facilitators prompts the group. "*Here,*" "*Me too*" come a couple of responses from the group. "*Cedar?*" "*Hickory?*" "*Basswood?*" "*Aspen?*" Kids self-assemble into groups. "*Okay, get to it, Cedar*" calls the Facilitator.

A forest of stewards

After the group splits, the three voices who called out to be ambassadors come greet me and one of the parents (the only other person who hasn't been out to The Wilds before). They let us know they'll be giving us a tour after morning fire. As we head inside, they explain the other jobs. *Cedar* is on Fire Duty: these kids get the fire started in the morning either at the outdoor fire circle or inside in the wood stove. They're also responsible for chopping and stacking wood and sweeping out ashes at the end of the day. *Birches* serve as ambassadors. Today they'll show the new visitor around, and when there aren't visitors they'll spend this time writing letters to their sister school in Greece. *Hickory* is the lunch crew. They work with Farmers Jessie and Gemme to harvest food from the garden, collect eggs, and help prepare lunch for the day. Contractors, or *Basswood*, work with Lynne, the campus handiman, on various projects. One of the toilets recently broke so they're going to ReSource to get a new toilet that they'll install. *Aspen* is outreach. They've been working on writing an article about the school for the *Journal of Natural History Education*.

Since it's a warm day in March, we're starting the day with a fire at the outdoor fire circle. For their independent projects, Aurora and Zoe had spent the last few weeks trying out different combinations of materials for fire-by-friction and today have settled on white pine and boxelder. They later tell me that their March project has been a combination of fire-by-friction and natural history. They made a map of the property with three layers. One of the layers delineated places for tinder. It highlighted patches of goldenrod, milkweed, dead ash trees, and a few stands of birch. The second layer looked

at species good for spindles and fire boards. A third layer was sheltered spaces that could be good for fires in a rainstorm. They're planning a trip to Rivercane Earthskills Gathering in April where they'll be leading a workshop on fire starting using 10 different techniques.

After the fire starts, we pass around a basket, expressing gratitude for something in the world we're grateful for. Zoe closes the circle with a poem she wrote about milkweed in winter. The group gets out their snacks, many of which Alex learns are fruit leathers they made in the fall from the fruit trees in their orchard. The Facilitators check in with the kids on their various projects. Matteo is planning a trip on the Long Trail for spring break. He's been creating a menu and packing list and working with Outdoor Gear Exchange to host a slideshow when he gets back. He spends most of his time reading first hand accounts people have written about their trips over the spine of the Green Mountains. Today he's writing to ultralight guru Ray Jardine to get advice on backpacks. Nevin's watching old skateboarding videos and working with Jeff, the resident woodworker to build a skateboard modeled after the old banana freestyle boards. Linden is taking voice lessons with Lauren and writing a play. Scout is helping her write it and they're learning from Korinna, a parent volunteer, how to make costumes. Cody and Helen are making bows, Cooper is experimenting with birch tar, Fisher is designing websites for other students' projects, Jackson is apprenticing with Meryl on film and together they've been making a series of educational videos, and the list goes on, the projects as varied as the students' interests.

Tree Projects

The group breaks after that and heads back to the building. Zoe and Aurora save a couple of coals in their comet (they read Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* and figured out how to make a fire carrier), and extinguish the rest. They bring the fire inside and get the wood stove going in the lounge. There's an hour transition period for "Tree Projects". The Birches - or ambassadors - collect me and we head off on a tour of the campus. The campus is made of one central building, a beautiful timber framed lodge, that is the heart of this community. Inside there's an industrial kitchen, library, natural history museum, classroom space, dining hall, lecture hall, and gathering space. Warm air filters into the main hall from a passive solar greenhouse on the south side of the building. Porky's sitting at the main desk with Tate, reviewing college applications for the coming school year. Alex is told that the middle school is one of four small schools housed in the building, an elementary school, a high school and a college being the other three. There are no distinct walls between the schools, and the groups share spaces and collaborate regularly. A mural on the wall behind Porky and Tate shows a triangle made of three trees whose canopies are interwoven. The trees are the central themes here:

Earth Skills, Permaculture, and Community Building. The trunk of each is a woven braid, the fibers are Science, Aesthetics, and Heart.

Corey, the librarian, is curating an exhibit on meditation practices in Burlington. She's been working with several of the college students and Vermont Folklife Center to document different practices in the community and over the next month they will be hosting weekend workshops led by community members. The high schoolers are using the community space on the first floor to plan out their end of year displays. Each high school student has been interning with different businesses and developing their own business model. The end of year displays will be the culmination of the experience and give students an opportunity to share their learnings with the community.

The main lodge is flanked by two smaller cobbed cottages. These - collectively called Studio Shire - are home to the Experts' studios. The spaces inside include a pottery studio, computer lab, woodshop, welding shop, open creative space, game room, and movie lounge. There's a hum of creative energy buzzing from the walls, past projects fill the walls, and I'm told that Experts apply for 1-2 year residencies. The practitioners split their time between teaching and mentoring learners at the different schools and working on their own projects. The list of past Experts includes welders and mechanics, poets, musicians, actors, writers, chemists, tinkerers, ship builders, bowyers, and lots of others they can't recall. Several of the experts are in their studios working on various projects. We stop in and say hi to Jeff, the woodworker, who's currently building cabinets with a couple of college apprentices. The wood was harvested and milled on the property.

Behind these is the residence hall. These are home to 30 college students and the 5 apartment-sized domiciles are open for the Experts and Facilitators to rent. The buildings themselves are beautiful. Most of the furniture in the buildings have been built by students working with Jeff, the stained glass is from a previous Expert, and the light fixtures from a metalworker. The wood was all harvested from the land as part of a management plan college students created 5 years ago in a land management design practicum. The footpaths between buildings are subtly adorned with creations of generations of students. The rest of the space is filled with fruit shrubs and trees, with flower buds ready to burst.

4C Group Projects

The tour ends after an hour, but there is still much to see as we didn't even make it into the woods. The tour guides pause and listen, the sounds of the Field School fill the woods with a sweet radiance. The next hour and a half before lunch is dedicated to group projects. These projects have been underway the last 2 weeks as part of three week rotations that run the whole school year. Each

rotation, the experts-in-residence pitch a different project that the kids each get to choose from. The projects are diverse, but all involve the four Cs: collecting, context, creation, and communication. Kids initially Collect information about their topic of interest. This may involve contacting experts, internet research, or digging into the library's resources. They use this background research to frame the Context - historical, geographic, cultural - in which the project exists. Then they get to flex their muscles by Creating. As the project comes to completion, they look for outlets to Communicate their results to the community.

This rotation Tiff, the artist in residence, is teaching five of the kids ceramics right now. Their bowls and cups will get donated to the Food Shelf. They researched food assistance programs in Vermont and will be volunteering at the Burlington Food Shelf. Alicia, the naturalist in residence, is taking a group paddling on the lake. They're working with Lake Champlain Basin Program to implement water quality monitoring at several drainage points that have had *E. coli* outbreaks in the last 10 years. They'll be sending an email to the adjacent FrontPorchForum community about best practices. Jeff, the woodworker in residence, is working with a group to build a new chicken coop for the garden. They've been meeting with Jessie to get input on their designs from her. Jay, the computer engineer in residence, is working with students to create a digital map of cultural resources in Burlington. Jessie, the farmer in residence, is working with students to create a recipe book for early spring edibles, both wild and cultivated.

Occasionally group projects are facilitated by other staff at the Lab School. Madeline, the school nurse practitioner, has led projects on wilderness first aid and the science behind vaccines. The students hosted a community forum on the facts and fictions of the vaccinations debate. Lynne, the campus handyman, led one on rewiring the student lounge to include overhead lights. Porky, the administrative guru, led one on knitting, a life-long hobby of hers. The kids donated their hats to Knots of Love, and did a hat exchange with kids in Uganda through Krochet Kids.

Lunch

As lunch approaches, Ruben blows his shofar to call the community into the dining hall. There are all ages in the big open room. Gemme, the cook, stands at the front and with the Hickories, they announce the day's lunch, and where the food came from. This week, Gemme partnered with Thai Phat to cook mostly Thai cuisine. Andy, the owner, worked with the Hickories to teach them how to use different seasonings to make several different curries. Around the dining hall, most of the tables are self-segregated by age, but there's camaraderie across schools and many of the tables are mixed. The Facilitators, parents, and Experts all have joined the group for lunch. There are also tables for

community members that want to join for lunch. Proceeds from community members goes into buying seeds, bee suits, sap buckets, and dehydrators.

Individual Projects

After lunch, the Hickories stick around to clean up, and I learn that there are Hickories from both the high school and college to help out. The middle schoolers head upstairs to the Learning Labs, where Facilitators will help them on their various projects. Facilitators offer support and guidance in developing the projects. Brian runs workshops on math, with titles like "Financing your project," "Trig for Building Projects," "Angles and boxes: making them fit," "Bioassays for beginners." Ash holds down the science end of things. A polymath, she runs labs on creating colors with chemistry, raising salamanders, and the physics of pulleys, levers, wheels, wedges, and other simple machines. Nick is a history buff through and through. He loves finding historical connections between current projects and the forebears that illuminated the magic behind them. Heather is constantly writing, and her passion for it is contagious. She not only helps the kids express their thoughts through written word, but she seems to have an author for every occasion (when a kid wanted to bike all the streets in Burlington, she responded, "Oh, did you read Travis Culley's *The Immortal Class*?").

The projects are in various stages of completion. Some of the students are on the phone, others are writing emails, some are down in the library, others are out in the Studio Shire creating, others in the woods with the Field School. A few have left campus and are meeting with experts or acquiring materials. It feels somewhat chaotic, but inspiring. Everyone seems so invested in their own learning. My imagination delights in the never-ending possibilities I might work on next year.

End of Day

As the day ends - a mere 7 hours later - I reflect on how much has happened. A stream of learners from the high school and middle school filter in and gather around the hearth, the Cedars from both groups stoke the fire. When all the students have arrived, different voices rise from the group, sharing stories and learnings from the day. Several of the high schoolers show off completed projects, and, as is typical, as many middle schoolers ask to learn these skills at Skill Share (each Friday is an open day where students from each school collaborate, share skills, and give demonstrations on the things they've made, like catapults, pinhole cameras, bows, gourd banjos, solar water purifiers, top bar hives, etc).

After the group has gone around sharing stories from the day, Magnus, one of the middle schoolers, shares a story he has been working on the last couple of weeks. While out on a hike two weeks

prior, he shared a memory with Anna, one of the Facilitators. She was struck by the power the memory held over him, and asked if he would flesh out the story and tell it at closing today. It's a beautiful story about discovering a fox den and watching a pair of foxes - both oblivious to his presence - play in a moss-covered break in the woods.

Pick-up

The story ends just as the Field School kids emerge from the woods. The temperature had dropped so Samantha and Maddie collected hemlock and made tea for the younger kids as they arrive. Before they can offer the tea, the little kids run up and tackle the middle schoolers. The middle schoolers spend about a quarter of their time out in the woods with the Field School program learning from the younger kids and sharing what they've learned.

I'm impressed at the circles of learning housed at the Lab School. Even the Experts are engaged in their own learning, refining their craft. When learners aren't around they're working on their own projects, expanding their own horizons. They are constantly generating new ideas. The group projects are inspired by things that they want to learn as much as by what they think the students will want to learn. The college students learn the same things as the middle and high schoolers, but go deeper into these subjects. They also expand outward, and have a strong emphasis on education, community building, and teaching others. Even the middle schoolers are seen as teachers at various times. They work with the younger kids at the Field School to share skills, the high schoolers are often asking them for help on projects, and they've been brought into City Hall for input on a range of subjects from bike lanes to new bus routes.

I am inspired by my day at the Lab School. When my dad arrives to pick me up, I beg him to sign me up.