

Saklan takes on wilderness as its first lesson

By Jackie Burrell
STAFF WRITER

Backpack-toting children are not an unusual sight on the first day of school, but the bags toted by Saklan middle schoolers beg the question — just how big could those textbooks be?

Saklan's young teens started their first days of school toting backpacking backpacks as they headed off into the Sierra foothills for a few days of camping and bonding with new classmates.

The private school invites cross-grade socializing and teamwork, so getting the sixth-graders comfortable with the older students is a key component of what the school calls a wilderness "Advance," rather than a retreat. Heading for Camp Lodestar in Gold Rush country, the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders

spend three days hiking, exploring and building school spirit.

The first day is spent on ice-breakers, getting kids and teachers acquainted or re-acquainted with one another, and breaking down barriers between grades. Team and trust-building activities follow, as children lead blindfolded classmates around a course, "Survivor" challenge style.

The third day serves as a transition into the school environment with camp skits focusing on school issues, from classroom expectations to the nitty gritty of lockers. And interspersed are hikes to a waterfall, a Native American village and some prime blackberry-picking sites.

"Taking intellectual risks takes a lot of groundwork to set up ... to feel comfortable with one another, safe with one an-

other," says middle school director Chris LaBonte. "There are so many social, emotional and interactional issues for adolescents."

For LaBonte, new to Saklan this year, the "Middle School Advance" was a great way to meet students and colleagues. By the time the 13 students and five teachers hit the classrooms last Monday, all barriers had broken down. "(This is) three weeks of work in three days. All those miscommunications, misinterpretations are less likely. We know each other's foibles," he says. "I got to see another side of these students I wouldn't normally see."

For Moraga eighth-grader Paula Yamamoto, the trip helps the student body jell as a group. "You get to know the sixth-graders better, form relation-

ships. If we didn't have it, if we went right to the classroom, you'd have this awkwardness," she says.

Albany eighth-grader Hannah Ellis agrees. "You get to do new things, learn how other people think," she says. "It's like a learning experience and a fun way to get out there. It makes it feel more comfortable to be yourself."

"You get to know people in a way you wouldn't have, because you're living with them," adds Lafayette eighth-grader Adesh Soni.

And for seventh-grader Brianna Roberts, the trip serves as gentle transition between summer and fall, "A last hurrah."



CONTRIBUTOR
SAKLAN VALLEY SCHOOL teacher Kerryn LaDuc plays a trustbuilding game with 6th grader Devin Roberts at a back-to-school camp in the Sierra foothills.

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