

## Tramping Trail with Elroy in the Early Years of CELP

By Karen O'Krafka

I am sipping tea on the eve of a week-long winter trip — over a decade since I first tramped trail with Mike Elrick into the winter wilderness. This evening holds for me the same electricity that it did in 1997 — anxiety and excitement — when Elroy guided a motley crew of teens (his gang) into the woods and frozen waters of Algonquin Park. With his wealth of wisdom, Mike carefully crafted those frozen days of prospector tents, baking bannock, singing, solos, star gazing and frozen-fingered guitar groove into the first few steps of a semester-long journey. Our journey meandered through winter, spring and summer, and explored a rich geography of life that failed to penetrate our school walls. We were intrepid, exploring the confluence of community, environment and leadership, and gaining invaluable life skills to meet the challenge of any life expedition. This journey was the Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP).

Whatever the brochure might have portrayed of tidy toboggans and well-baked bread, this semester-long program wasn't just a casual wander through the wilderness. CELP proved to be a challenging expedition into uncharted territories of communication, conflict resolution, teaching and learning. There were community day cooking disasters, days when we thought the "rain" — a brilliant metaphor for conflict resolution circles replete with rain stick — would never end, and even the blurred boundary between the new sense of self we felt emerging through our experiences and the familiar life of high school we greeted upon our return from Crief Hills every afternoon. Mike was an anchor and an ear through all of our tumult. He had patience and passion to match all of our angst. He spoke to us as though he were sharing our journey. This wasn't old hat for him; he was in the immediacy of our experience, but brought good long-burning hard wood to temper our sometimes furious fires. Whenever we tripped on our impatience or haste, Mike gently reminded us of the gifts of time for learning these hard lessons. He said it takes ten years to truly learn something. Our impatient adolescence could hardly conceive of ten

years, but time flowed down the Speed River and I end up here, writing about his legacy.

I thought it might be interesting to have perspectives on the early years of CELP, but realize that Mike's qualities are indelible. I'm sure that these qualities resonate with who he has always been as a teacher and as a person; there seemed to be no separation between his roles, and no wavering from his foundations of integrity and authentic living. Mike taught who he was — not from his intellect but from his heart. He taught from his family, his breadth of skills and his passions. He would share stories of his young son Nick, sing his favorite songs, tell of epics on the trail and share both the greatest successes and most difficult challenges of his professional life in rich detail. There was always a timely anecdote to enhance our experience. He was a musical maven, a bread baker, and so many more marvelous things all in the same breath, and it seemed that he wanted to teach the richness of life, not just academics.

These memories have informed so many experiences of continued growth and learning for me, constantly encouraging me to live well. Some have taken on a dreamlike quality, or grown into myths in my mind. Where memories blend together into the soft blur of time, the clarity and effervescence of my journal has endured. It remembers the textures and expressions of CELP 1997 — a brief moment shared with Mike, like so many moments had with so many students, on the winter trail or biking through bioregions. Mike encouraged this documenting of experience, and his penned notes in the margins of my entries challenged thoughts and encouraged reflection. With a few pen strokes he could validate our struggles and invite us to continue. He would write: "Yes!", "great stuff seeing the positive," "sounds powerful, have to chat more," and "we journeyed forward that day" — and we knew he meant it. Authenticity was at the fore of how he interacted with us. On one entry where I debated future paths, he wrote about how he had applied to medical school years back. How were we so fortunate that

he chose the path of educator and mentor instead?

He chose this path, and was constantly learning and fine-tuning the program. He shared that learning with us and never obscured his mistakes. We all learned from those early challenges and his learning enriched ours. One epic from our semester was our winter camp food boxes. These containers might often be a footnote in a winter expedition, but not for us. Mike was experimenting on our trip, and as with all experiments, this one had an unexpected outcome. We had cardboard containment for our food, and anyone who has watched the interaction of cardboard and the elements knows that water always wins. But what if we added spar varnish to our cardboard boxes? Surely what works for boats and paddles and snowshoes would waterproof cardboard as well. Yes, our food was dry and contained, but varnish vapours pervaded our senses for an entire week — lingering in our oatmeal, our lunchtime bagels and gorp, and revisiting us constantly in well-varnished burps. Some ideas are better than others, and there was learning. The best part? Mike had the humility

to admit his error, and endured constant ribbing — in fact our semester was lubricated by the varnish incident. And no one was better at reminiscing than Elroy.

Epics also hid in the woods around our log cabin classroom. What an experience to tap trees and boil down sap as thank yous for our numerous guests, and sticky joy for our Earthkeeper students. Sometimes our efforts boiled over; once they boiled dry, scorching our labour into the bottom of our fire-heated pans. Mike shared our frustration at the loss of a big batch. We cursed and kicked the ground, and then we scrubbed the pan and began again. We learned to persevere, and enjoy the sweetness of hard-earned, sometimes burned success.

And no one celebrated our successes, big and small, more than our mentor, Mike. I will tramp trail this week to the rhythm of his songs and in thanks for his gifts.

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March 8, 2004 — I was having coffee this morning at my morning meditation station in Cedar Lodge and it came to me that if the grade 12 program is going to fly, it is going to have to be in semester two. Start with the winter trip, maybe go a half week later and then finish with the canoe trip the old way — the Eramosa way. Start out at Edgewood, but then head upstream for several days, then back to Guelph to meet the parents at the Boathouse for a potluck supper. Could cut the cherry trees in February and have them dried in the solar kiln for May/June. Make paddles from the land to paddle on the land. Our home and native land.

Just as I was thinking all this through a large broad-winged hawk landed in a cedar across from me. It was huge. The blue jays were trying to scare it away with their call. I went out to see it closer. Beautiful. It simply had the feeling of good medicine. A sign from the great spirit — and just good energy all around. Not to say this grade 12 thing will happen, but things feel good.