AN EXPLORATORY EXPERIENCE

A Midwest native rolled the dice on an outdoors career, and now inspires thousands of folks to explore the Pacific Northwest.

Jeff Ozimek bags a razor clam near Pacific Beach during one of the Bainbridge Parks outings he organized.

By TRISTAN BAURICK

The rain shifted to a hard-blown slant as the crew of first-time razor clammers marched to the ocean’s edge. In quick succession, rubber boots were flooded, pants were soaked, and hands were covered in frigid muck.

Weaving through the hunched and shivering clammers was Jeff Ozimek, smiling broadly. When he dug in and missed, he laughed. When he caught one, he beamed with the kind of boyish glee most grownups bottled up before they hit their teenage years.

Somehow, Ozimek still had it, and when he uncorked it — holding up a tiny clam as though he struck gold — the mood couldn’t help but lift.

Ozimek is the founder and manager of the Bainbridge Island Metropolitan Park and Recreation District’s rapidly growing outdoors program. The three-day claming outing he helped lead near Pacific Beach was one of the hundreds of trips and classes he has crammed into the program since he launched it four years ago.

“Jeff’s somebody who’s got a lot of energy and enthusiasm going all the time,” said his boss, John DeMeyer, the district’s recreation services director. “We saw the potential for our outdoors program for a long time. We just needed the right person to bring it out.”

Since Ozimek was hired in late 2010, the number of outdoor activities has grown from a random assortment of bird watching walks and day hikes to eight pages of offerings in the district’s summer programs catalog.

A random sampling from the fall catalog included kayak rescue techniques, mountain
He fell in with the guys from the forestry school. They weren’t quite a fraternity, but they had their own traditions, threw their own dances and even had their own sports.

“That’s how I got into logging — competitive logging,” he said, listing off a number of events he tried — the pole climb, the choker setter race, the ax throw. He excelled at birling, a bruising test of balance on a floating log.

His work history during and after college looks like that of an outdoor enthusiast with raging wanderlust.

Backcountry trail worker in Utah. Youth sailing instructor in Massachusetts. Outdoor challenge course director in California. Sailing program leader in the Virgin Islands. Education director aboard a tall-masted ship sailing the East Coast and Great Lakes.

“Everybody needs to connect to the land,” he said. “There’s no one right answer why. It might be to get solitude or joy or adventure. Everybody has something to find. They’ll find it if they spend enough time outdoors.”

Eventually, he settled into graduate school, studying recreation management at Aurora University in Illinois. He combined his graduate studies with a job at a parks department in a small Wisconsin town.

When his boss suddenly quit, Ozimek found a vast load of responsibility had fallen on his shoulders.

“It was just me and an intern, and we ran everything — the baseball schedule, putting out the brochure, doing registration, manning the desk. We had to run the Fourth of July Parade, which had, like, 1,500 people,” he said.

Was he overwhelmed?

“People who know me know that my energy level’s really high, so I went into it with that, and took every opportunity to the fullest,” he said. “There were long hours, but never burnout.”

Finding his passion

Ozimek, who grew up in the Chicago suburbs, found his passion for the outdoors when he headed to Missoula to study recreation resource management at the University of Montana.

Biking at South Kitsap’s Banner Forest, star-watching parties, wild herb foraging, rock climbing for toddlers, and bus trips to ski at Stevens Pass.

Most parks programs in Kitsap County are tied to departments within a larger entity — a city or the county government. All have slimmed their parks program offerings in recent years. What’s left are mostly indoor pursuits — a few fitness classes; painting and drawing; maybe some ballroom dancing or an after-work basketball league.

The Bainbridge park district isn’t tied to another agency. Operating on its own, the district has an elected board and draws much of its revenue directly from taxpayers. This structure, along with broad support on Bainbridge for outdoor activities, has allowed the district to take the rare step offering an expansive slate of activities that help get people recreating on trails, beaches and mountains.

Last year, the combined number of hours people spent playing or learning through the outdoors program topped 41,000.

“We’ll probably hit 50,000 this year,” Ozimek said. “Every year it goes up and up.”
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A dream job
When Bainbridge came calling, it offered the freshly minted grad an enticing prospect: “A blank slate,” he said.
“It was great,” he said. “I had my dream job before I was 30.”
Ozimek built the outdoors program from the ground up, taking what he calls a “grassroots” approach.
“We stressed that we like connections, that we want people to come back,” he said.
“That’s how it grew — (through) the referrals. People trust their friends...so we make sure people get what they want out of our trips.”

Despite Bainbridge’s reputation for affluence, Ozimek learned many people couldn’t afford the class fees or the required gear.
He made classes bigger to reduce individual fees and cut the added gear-use charges that seemed to “punish” people who didn’t have their own equipment.
Ozimek established a “gear bank” full of tents, rain coats, camp stoves and other items that people can check out, much like a library.

A growing reputation
Alex Sanso credits the outdoors program for giving her the confidence to take her family into the backcountry.
“We loved to hike but to actually go backpacking seemed too daunting,” she said.
“You’re on your own, and there’s all the special equipment and you don’t know where to go.”

A group camping trip through the Hoh Rainforest changed her perspective.
“They took care of everything, showed us how it’s done and we could just enjoy the scenery,” she said.

Since then, her family has trekked into the backcountry a half-dozen times. They’re taking on tougher terrain and going for longer stretches.
“We never would have known about these amazing places,” she said.
Roslyn Webber said the program has been transformative for her 12-year-old son. An introductory mountain biking class he took when he was 10 sparked a passion for trail riding. He now has a group of weekend riding buddies and has set his sights on joining Bainbridge High School’s mountain bike team.

“I’m hoping they’ll offer a class for adults so I can keep up with him,” Webber said.
The outdoors program’s slate of foraging classes is one of its biggest and most surprising successes, Ozimek said.
The razor clamming outing was booked far in advance, and most of its participants were from the Seattle area. Lessons on how to find and cook such wild wonders as stinging nettles and geoducks have had signups from as far away as Idaho and British Columbia and earned mentions in Sunset magazine and the New York Times.

Managers of other parks programs are increasingly seeking advice from Ozimek, and university students have studied the outdoors program as a model for success.
Ozimek admits it’s all part of his master plan.
“Over the next five years, I want to bring in other agencies to show them how we’re doing it,” he said. “I want to keep it building and make it a shining star on the West Coast.”