

# Penn College Human Services and Restorative Justice Students Kayak Rose Valley Lake



Photos - Cindy Matzel (Pennsylvania College of Technology)

by Rob Cooley

A group of Pennsylvania College of Technology Human Services and Restorative Justice students are taking a unique course this May, Outdoor Recreation as a Therapeutic Tool (HSJ330), taught by Dr. Rob Cooley, associate professor of anthropology/environmental science. The goal of the class is to provide future human service professionals (therapists, counselors, corrections, etc.) with experience using activities like boating and fishing in nontraditional, therapeutic ways for a diverse range of client needs. Class activities include structured team building and challenge activities as well as recreational activities like hiking, bicycling, kayaking, and fishing. It is not just “play,” but more like “play with purpose.” Students learn how to take an activity that seems like recreation and then use it to structure therapeutic discussions and activities afterwards amongst the participants.

Any angler would agree that enjoying Pennsylvania lakes and streams is good for the soul. Increasingly, human services and restorative justice professionals are turning to this age-old wisdom to benefit nontraditional, therapeutic uses.

Dr. Cooley challenged his students to kayak and explore Rose Valley Lake, Lycoming County, a 389-acre impoundment owned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and managed by the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC). He wanted this diverse class, largely female, to personally experience the enjoyment of kayaking. He is planning a fishing trip for them later in the class to achieve a similar outcome but through a different activity. Many of them have not fished much before, either.



Nicole Smulligan, a Pennsylvania College of Technology Human Services and Restorative Justice student from Schuylkill County, gets ready to take her kayak out on the lake.

Kayaks and gear for this experience were provided as a result of a collaboration between Cooley at Penn College and Jae Ellison, director of Lycoming College’s Outdoor Leadership and Education (OLE) Program. OLE made



the experience possible for Penn College by generously sharing Mr. Ellison's time, a trailer full of kayaks, and all the necessary paddling gear.

Some of the Penn College students were experienced; others were novices. Cooley and Ellison provided close supervision and guidance from start to finish. First, Ellison provided an introduction to paddling technique, safety, and equipment, and helped each student into their boats. Once on the water, Ellison led the group while Cooley followed, helping guide the student paddlers, providing tips, techniques, wildlife observations, and encouragement. They both helped the students get in and out of their boats safely as well. Not a single person had a surprise splash in the lake.

The goals for the activity were simple—learn how to paddle safely and effectively, observe the natural world, and consider the benefits for such an activity in a therapeutic context. Also, they had to consider how kayaking may help someone's recovery from whatever trauma they have experienced or challenge(s) they face.

The day was perfect weather—calm, deep blue sky, spring wildflowers along the shoreline, bullfrogs croaking, songbirds singing, puffy clouds reflecting in sharp detail on the mirror-smooth water. The views were stunning. The students were fascinated with the aquatic life. "It is like looking into an aquarium," said one of the students.

The reactions were overwhelmingly positive. In the end, nine students benefited from a PFBC resource in an entirely unconventional way. Each student learned how to use paddling to understand oneself and how to use the experience to help others work through the challenges they face in an adventurous, creative way. Cooley overheard many of the students discussing going back and continuing their involvement in kayaking and Pennsylvania's water resources.

Below are some quotes that summarize the transformational impact that this deceptively simple kayak trip had for the students in this class.

"Being a part of some new experiences or fears for some people and being there to support them is amazing. With



*Kai Marshall, a Pennsylvania College of Technology Human Services and Restorative Justice student from Schuylkill County, carries the paddles down to the water.*

our group of individuals, we have mostly women, but they all shined through and loved every minute of it. I know I did. This was a team effort, and we all did so well to support one another," said Payge Hess.

"I would say yes, it was a challenge for me because of my fear for water. If it was not for Dr. Cooley or my fellow classmates, I would have hated the experience altogether. With their constant support and pushing me through my time of need, I actually enjoyed the experience," said Cody Englehart.

"He said he was shaking when he first began kayaking, and by the end, he said he had lost his shake and actually found a little tiny sliver deep down that enjoyed the experience. I was super proud of him and super happy to be someone to help him through a day that he more than likely will reflect on for the rest of his life. This was a great example of how that trip may transform people, fears, and relationships between people for the better," said Krystle Richardson.

"This was peaceful for me to see the fish, turtles, and the lily pads. The lily pads were in the ugliest part of the water but seemed to be so convenient for the frogs. Just like Human Services, we are present during the worst part of someone's life, but we are there for people's convenience," said Nicole Smulligan.

"There is something about just being on the water that is so calming to me and brings me that instant stress relief that everyone needs," said Devon Wasson. ☐



*Dr. Rob Cooley, associate professor of anthropology/environmental science; Brad Grenoble; Jae Ellison, director of Lycoming College's Outdoor Leadership and Education Program; Payge Hess; Krystle Richardson; Nicole Smulligan; Kai Marshall; Devon Wasson; Colin Browne; and Cody Englehart.*