

TU Teens chapter is educational, fun

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GALLIPOLIS — Gallia Academy Middle School teacher Shannon Mayes has turned one of his passions into what's turning out to be a fun time for a group of students.

The result is Gallia Academy boasts the only Trout Unlimited Teen chapter in Ohio — at least for now.

Mayes is an avid outdoorsman and is combining his love of the outdoors with his love of teaching. Once classroom time is over, Mayes, assisted by fellow teacher Jayne Burger, begin opening the eyes of students to outdoor wonders. Mayes (writing) and Burger (reading) teach together during school hours so continuing to teach together in an after-school program seemed like a natural fit.

“I just assist and do a lot of the paperwork,” Burger said.

Three days a week — Monday, Wednesday and Thursday — the pair run a hunter education course that certifies students who want to get a hunting license. Tuesday afternoons are given over to learning about fishing — specifically, fly fishing.

TU Teens is part of the Recreation On Campus for Kids (ROCKS) program at GAMS and is affiliated with Madmen Chapter 447 of Trout Unlimited, the

national organization of trout fishermen with roughly 160,000 members. The chapter takes its name after the Mad River in western Ohio. In its second year, TU Teens boasts roughly 25 members in a curriculum that is part classroom and part outdoor experience.

While TU Teens is meant to be fun and an enjoyable experience, a strong learning component is also involved and that learning isn't just about fishing. Students participating in TU Teens are asked to sign a contract and make a commitment to the year-long program. By signing, students and their parents, agree to attend chapter meetings and not quit during the school year.

"I expect them to make a commitment and they do. If a student misses I'm on the phone with their parents to find out what's going on," Mayes said. He does recognize conflicts can arise and works with students when those come up. A couple of students play basketball, for example, so during the season they take time off for that activity.

For their \$8 annual dues students receive a Stream Explorer membership, a TU Teens cap and t-shirt. They also get use of fishing equipment during the year.

"I have really good sponsors" Mayes said. "Local businesses and even some private individuals wanted to help out." Among those sponsors are: Lorobi's, CNE Poured Walls, Remo's, Charleston Acoustics, Gallipolis Vault Co., Riverside Motel, Ohio Valley Bank, The Emblem Club, Wiseman Real Estate, Crab Creek Trucking, Wiseman Agency Inc., Bev Young, Mark Sheets, Attorney, Tom Richie, A-1 Glass & Doors, Clark Club Lambs, State Street Management, Cremeans Concrete, The Coach's Corner, TU Madmen Chapter 477 and Short Stitch.

During classroom time, students learn about fishing basics but they also learn about "Etiquette on the Water." A handout from Mayes and Burger spells out how fishermen (fishermen is a generic term applied to both genders; almost half of the local TU chapter are girls) are meant to conduct themselves on the water and around other fishermen.

Part of that etiquette involves respecting others: be quiet, don't crowd others while they fish, be willing to share fishing information and don't hog one spot are some examples. Students also learn to respect the outdoors. Do not litter and practice "catch and release," keeping only what they want to eat are a couple of examples.

And they also are taught to enjoy themselves. Mayes reminds students that fly fishing can be frustrating so they should learn to laugh at themselves, learn from it and enjoy their time on the water.

Students also learn about identifying fish, caring for their equipment, how to “read the water” and the various flies used to catch trout. They will also have an opportunity to tie their own flies in a few weeks.

Moving outdoors, they will begin to learn the proper way to cast into the water. In a recent classroom session, Mayes was explaining some of the intricacies of casting, reminding them to look behind them for such things as trees, for example.

“I probably have a thousand flies in trees all around the country,” Mayes told the students, proving that even experienced fishermen mess up occasionally and the only thing to do is laugh at yourself and move on.

Next month, a representative from Trout Unlimited will visit the club, bringing maps of area rivers and streams where trout fishing is done and bringing students their own fly boxes.

When warmer weather arrives, students will have an opportunity to get out and test what they’ve learned on area ponds.

“We’ll go out to Bob Evans this spring and several individuals have offered to let me use their private ponds,” Mayes said. He added that the school also owns a pond of its own that the club will use.

The teacher does find a little irony in having a fly fishing club in an area where there’s no trout to fish for, but he also knows students will find a way to use what they’re learning. And, a couple of students in the club received fly fishing rods as Christmas presents.

Mayes explained there are bigger opportunities beyond giving students something fun to do that’s educational. TU offers a summer camp program students can apply for and if chosen they’ll get to attend and fish, but also learn more about such things as conservation efforts.

Mayes also pointed out a recent high school student, Jarrett Martin, earned a bass fishing scholarship to college.

Mayes said he has been contacted by several area schools to learn about what he's doing and starting a chapter in their district as well, an idea Mayes said he is more than willing to do.

So while the local chapter may not be the "only" club in the state, they will always be able to lay claim to be the first thanks to the passion of a teacher.

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