

A Private Magazine for the Residents of Portola Valley and Woodside

MOUNTAIN HOME

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Emily Dellinger Shares Her Passion for the Outdoors

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Emily Dellinger Shares Her Passion for the Outdoors

Abbie Burgess



Emily with K-3rd grade students at the after-school program at Kings Mountain. Photo by Aaron Alvarez Mendoza

In tech-focused Silicon Valley, one Woodside resident is helping kids and teens trade tech for treks. Her organization, Venture Free Foundation, has programs for elementary, middle, and high school-aged children, and young adults of all backgrounds to foster a lifelong appreciation for nature and the outdoors through summer camps and after-school adventures.

Emily's own interest in the outdoors started early in life—very early. “I have been camping since I was in my mom's tummy, surfing since I was 11, and rock climbing since 13,” she says. But most of all, her connection with the outdoors was cultivated by growing up in the redwood forest above the ocean in Kings Mountain. “It was a place I felt comfortable and unconfined to explore, interact and learn the way that I do.”

Emily turned her own personal connection with nature into Venture Free Foundation. “It simply started as wanting to get kids outside and interacting with nature, and learning from it the way that I had as a child,” she explains.

She was at a crossroads in her own life, working as a kids counselor and preparing to go back to school to complete her final prerequisites for a Master's in nursing after graduating with a BA in Psychology. Nursing had been her life goal since being diagnosed with Type I diabetes at age seven. “I had my heart set on becoming a nurse so that I too could make people feel good and cared for when they need it most,” she says. Instead, she found herself being pulled in a new direction, toward working with children and inspiring them to interact with nature, and each other, instead of social media and the internet.

Her path became clear while on an adventure with her parents and a group of family friends, sleeping under the stars in the Eastern Sierras. “After a 20-mile day hike to the Palisade Glacier, I decided I was not going back to school,” she remembers. “A lot of people have inspired



Emily leading the VFF after-school program at Kings Mountain. Photo provided by Aaron Alvarez Mendoza

me in many ways that led me to where I am. But ultimately, it was the stars, hiking, and a desire to be happy.”

Her father, an entrepreneur, had instilled in Emily from an early age the possibility of creating her own business. She explains, “It was the sense of, you can do what you want, you just have to do it.” She started Venture Free Foundation in 2014 as a sole proprietorship, then transitioned it to a nonprofit a few years later.

As she began working with kids in an unstructured small group setting, she observed the different ways that children learn. “I have always been fascinated by children. I love to watch their interactions and their reactions, and interpret and understand why they made a decision or came to a conclusion that they did.”

Emily knows from personal experience that there are different learning types, not all of which are catered to in a traditional classroom setting. “I have always been a hands-on learner, and the kind of kid who doesn't understand until I do it myself. You can just tell me something, but unless I feel it, see it, comprehend it, experience it, it likely will not last in my memory.”

Benefits of Learning in Nature

An abundance of research supports the benefits to all—but especially children—of stepping away from technology to spend time in nature. “Research shows that students’ mental health and academic performance both improve when learning outdoors,” Emily states.

The benefits for children being outside in nature are almost too numerous to count, Emily says, but emotional, intellectual, and behavioral development are major ones. “Additional benefits are being physically active, caring for nature, decision-making, confidence, and learning how all things are intertwined, and oh my goodness, so much more!”

She adds, “Then of course there is the green space thing; the psychological restoration that green space is proven over and over again to provide. Meaning that green spaces protect your brain against mood disorders. Being in these natural spaces that your body is most biologically in tune with is like a natural defense against depression, neurotic behaviors, and stress, and also a regulator of neurodevelopmental disorders.”

In addition, Emily watches children in the VFF program develop leadership skills, communication skills and a sense of adventure. “The ability to free play offers opportunities to problem solve and improvise. It gives kids a chance to practice communicating between themselves. It allows them to experiment,” she explains.

“Not all technology is bad, and it is just a major part of the world we live in now,” Emily says. But it does have drawbacks, one of which is limiting the amount of outdoor play and exposure to nature that we get. And Venture Free Foundation seeks to restore some of that balance.

Equity and the Outdoors

One thing that surprises many people is that there is a major inequity in outdoor exposure. Emily explains, “Natural outdoor spaces are most easily accessed by people and kids from higher-income families.” Venture Free Foundation is part of changing that. “We love being able to introduce the kids we work with to exciting outdoor places, new

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Emily with the Terra Teen group in 2021 on a backpacking trip to summit Mount Whitney. Photo provided by Venture Free Foundation.

to them, that are so close to their homes, then we get to hear about them going back to these areas with their families for them all to enjoy!"

Life on the Mountain

"My parents, Marty and Cindy Phelps, lived on Kings Mountain when I was born," says Emily, who has lived her whole life in Woodside except for college.

Emily met her husband Andrew while attending the University of California Santa Cruz. They married in 2015 in the Redwood forest behind the King's Mountain Volunteer Fire Brigade, which she had joined after High School.

Their three-year-old daughter Ophelia is learning to enjoy the outdoors just like her mom. "My daughter and I love taking walks, going to the beach and digging. She loves 'campovers' - what she calls a camping trip or a sleepover! And she loves working in the garden with her dad."

Growing up in Woodside, and still today, Emily loves watching Redwoods sway in the wind during storms, the smell of the dirt and the forest, and the community and sense of camaraderie. "I love the crickets in the summer and the inversion, when it gets hotter on the mountain at night than it was during the day."

The Woodside and Mountain community are also an inspiration to Emily. "I have always loved our community and the feeling of being connected with your neighbors, and of being there for each other."

Read more about Venture Free Foundation at venturefreefoundation.org.

How You Can Help

Venture Free Foundation looks forward to having a booth at the Kings Mountain Art Fair in August. To give craft supplies, volunteer your time or find other ways to support the Foundation, visit www.venturefreefoundation.org/support-us.html.

After School Adventure Camp at Purisima Creek Redwood Open Space. Photo provided by Venture Free Foundation.



Harvesting snap peas from the VFF vegetable garden. Photo provided by Venture Free Foundation.