All hands on deck: Minnetonka middle schoolers build 15-foot canoe

The canoe from Notre Dame Academy will be up for auction in April

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(SUBMITTED PHOTOS)

Middle school students at Notre Dame Academy work together to build a 15-foot canoe with Urban Wilderness Program.

The Camping and Education Foundation's Urban Wilderness Program visited sixth, seventh and eighth grade students at Notre Dame Academy in Minnetonka for a week of skin-on-frame canoe building.

Catholic Schools Center of Excellence awarded the PreK-8 school with a grant to work with Urban Wilderness Program's boat building program, empowering students to grow as a team and gain an appreciation of nature through personal connection.

The boat building combined experiential and STEM-based learning to help students develop various skills, including carving; steam bending; and interpersonal and teamwork skills.

Jerry Dargis, a science teacher at Notre Dame Academy, said that every student in grades six through eight has contributed to the canoe project, making it a very unique team building experience.

"The fact that they're being trusted with something that they're probably not normally trusted with is a huge self esteem builder," Dargis said. "They're working with partners, so there's leadership and ownership and team building going on."

Students built a 15-foot, two-person boat with two paddles out of various types of wood, including cherry wood, basswood and pine. The boat is able to carry approximately 600 lb.

"The basswood is [used for] paddles; the cherry is for the harder pieces like the keel, the yoke and the seats; and then the whole boat skeleton is white pine usually," said Alex Kahn, boat building assistant at UWP.

Students exclusively used hand tools– planers, saws and shavers– for the construction process, with the exception of electric drills.

Any leftover wood scraps are then appropriately recycled, with UWP actively brainstorming ways to use the scraps for new projects and activities. In this case, the wood shavings will be used as bedding for Dargis' classroom pet snakes.

UWP partners with St. Paul-based woodshop Sheer Craft to obtain the necessary boat building materials and tools. All wood obtained for the canoe projects are untreated and clean, acquired through lumber yards and reclaimed woods.

In addition to providing supplies, Sheer Craft also mills and cuts the ribs, stringers and paddle blanks so students can safely and accurately assemble their boats.

Upon completion of its construction, students are allowed to paint the canoe, decorating it with school stickers, colors and other spirited accessories. It will be up for auction in April 2026 at Notre Dame Academy's Grand Beginnings fundraiser.

The Urban Wilderness Program began 12 years ago in Cincinnati and expanded its services to Minneapolis two years ago, starting with a pilot year. Since opening over a decade ago, Urban Wilderness Program has built more than 70 canoes, hosted hundreds of field trips and worked with nearly 8,000 students.

Its parent organization, the Camping and Education Foundation, offers two wilderness camps for boys and girls, both located in International Falls; Camp Kooch-i-ching (boys), founded more than 100 years ago; and Ogichi Daa Kwe (girls), founded in the early 2000s.

Nature is at the heart of each camp's focus and mission, with canoeing being a popular activity connecting campers to the natural environment.

"The goal of specifically Urban Wilderness Minnesota is to connect young people growing up here to the history of canoeing and the major cultural role that it plays in the state," Kahn said. "To connect them with their local history, to get them working with their hands and get them working together."





