

Volunteers at Frink Outdoor Education Centre

For the love of nature

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By Henry Bury
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PLAINFIELD — As a teacher, George Thomson tried to instill a love of and respect for nature in his students.

He's continuing to do that, even as a retired educator.

The 59-year-old Thomson and trained botanist volunteers every Monday at the H.R. Frink Outdoor Education Centre and Natural Science School near here and one of his main responsibilities is helping students understand their natural environment. He accompanies visiting classes and points out what they can find on their hike through the natural habitat that covers approximately 400 acres.

"I have a deep commitment to protecting our environment and I feel if young people can learn things early on about the environment, they will be more prepared to make good decisions on the environment when they're adults," said Thomson.

Thomson was a science teacher for 29 years before retiring in 1997.

In his years at Belleville Collegiate Institute and Quinte Secondary School, he regularly took his students to the Frink Centre to enable them to become better-versed in different ecosystems and natural features, including drumlins, streams, swamps, marshes, beaver ponds and succession fields as well as to study plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, trees and shrubs.

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Frink Centre and studying things up close," he said.

When he retired, Thomson occasionally helped out with various classes visiting the Frink Centre.

In January, he decided to devote one full day a week to volunteering at the outdoor education centre.

"I wish I had started doing this one day a week stint earlier on in my retirement. I really enjoy nature and I missed interacting with my

students. Besides, this is one way in structuring my life in a way that I'm making a contribution to society and giving myself a sense of fulfillment," he said.

Thomson is at the centre every Monday from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.. And every Monday, there's a different classroom of elementary students relying on his expertise to help guide them on their interpretive walks.

He's gone snowshoeing with them, built shelters and winter beds out of evergreen boughs, taught them how to survive in the wilderness and identified animal tracks, plants and vegetation as well as different birds for them.

"This volunteering is a great way to start a week out," Thomson said. "It gets me out in the great outdoors and allows me to continue my pursuit of nature studies...it's good for my physical, mental and emotional well-being."

Bea Heissler has come to rely on Thomson's commitment to volunteer at the Frink Centre.

"George is familiar with the centre and with his background in biology and environmental science, he's a great resource person to have around," said Heissler, outdoor education coordinator for the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board.

"Teachers also really appreciate the help with their classes."

Heissler is also grateful for volunteers like Thomson.

"Being the only full-time paid employee here, volunteer assistance is crucial to the success of the Frink Centre whether it's working with students or carrying out maintenance or special projects," she said.

Intelligencer - Apr. 7/01 p. 16

Thompson, George