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Opening up trails

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Nothing was ever boring for Sara Leone. Everything elicited questions and wonderment. Maybe that's just how the pony-tailed, 15-year-old was, but her mother couldn't help but think the outdoors had something to do with it.

Since she was little, Sara enjoyed skiing and hiking with friends and family, while seeking out more solitary pastimes like collecting sand dollars and diving. As she got older, trips with the outing club at Wiscasset High School dominated her social life.

"She was just real comfortable outside," her mother Carol Leone said. "Nothing was too big to tackle. Nothing seemed scary or fearsome."

After Sara died in a car accident in 2005, her family channeled its grief into creating a new organization she would have championed.

Teens To Trails works to connect teenagers with nature, by providing administrative and financial support to outing clubs at high schools. It holds its first conference March 24 at Windham High School for outing club advisers and members, as well as people who want to start clubs at their schools.

Leone, a former U.S. Park Service ranger, said outing clubs can be an expensive venture because of the cost of transporting students and hiring guides.

"Those are real-life issues that outing club advisers have to deal with," Leone said. But she added, "there is so much that is free and available."

Next month's conference, for example, will feature Maine registered guides who Leone said would love to use their skills in their off hours, but can't afford to get the necessary liability insurance.

"Wouldn't they just love to have someone pay them to help organize an outing?" Leone asked.

The conference, which is being sponsored by New England Grassroots Environment Fund and Larry Malone of Malone Auto Racks, also will showcase staff from Baxter State Park, the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, Maine Island Trail and Appalachian Trail. Bill Yeo, the Mainer who climbed Mount Everest last spring, will give a keynote address and slide presentation of his trip up the world's tallest mountain.

Workshops will feature experts on a range of topics including backpacking, fly-fishing, winter camping, orienteering, bike maintenance and cooking over a campfire.

Jeff Riddle, the outing club adviser at Windham High School who works for Teens To Trails, said that the organization will continue to provide support for advisors even after the conference.

Unlike Riddle, who is also a science teacher, most advisers do not receive a stipend and are leading outing clubs because of their passion for the outdoors. Unfortunately, passion alone is not enough to successfully lead a club, Riddle said. Advisors must feel comfortable supervising a large group of teenagers at the same time.

"You have to be competent with your skills so you can always be in control of the risks," Riddle said.

That's not so much the issue for Michael Carroll, who used to lead an outing club at a New York school before he started teaching freshman science at Scarborough High School last fall.

But when several students approached Carroll about starting a club at Scarborough High, he got a little nervous about the logistics of launching such an operation at a much-larger school in a new state.

"At the conference, I'd like to talk to someone about the legal issues, like transportation and safety and what kind of documentation you need from parents to say it is OK," Carroll said.

Leone said the goal of Teens To Trails is to help teachers like Carroll network with club advisers and other experts. As the

organization grows, different outing clubs can split off into three or four clusters around the state and plan trips and other events together.

The plan is to win more grants so Teens to Trails can provide assistance to outing clubs, be it first-aid kits or financial aid with a sea kayaking trip.

Leone, who runs a boat-lettering business during the boating season, said there are plenty of efforts to get younger children into the outdoors, but less so for teenagers. She said she knows of no organization that is trying to promote high school outing clubs the way Teens to Trails is doing.

"It's not too late for teenagers if they've never been outside before," Leone said. "It's not too late to have it change the person they are and how they approach this world."

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