



The RiverSense Project

“Teaching River Awareness, Safety and Citizenry”



The RiverSense Project is a community effort to create, design and sustain river safety programs that help river communities be “river-wise”. The intention is to dream forward a whole network of programming in collaboration with schools, parks and search and rescue organizations. Initially we are beginning with in river programs, designed for youth of different ages and experience levels to heighten awareness and understanding of the river environment and to develop the skills necessary to stay safe while playing and recreating on the river. Objectives emphasize developing self-rescue skills, utilizing existing water dynamics, and handling hazards and obstacles. The in-river courses are modified from technical swift water rescue modules similar to the swift water courses we teach for river and rescue professionals. These experiences are unique because they teach about being “in river” as opposed to bween “on river”.



THE VISION



- ◆ River communities will become “river-wise”
- ◆ All community youth will be trained, in some form, in river awareness,
- ◆ Schools will foster river safety awareness through annual assemblies and PE and science units (hydrology),
- ◆ We will have a network of river safety advocates of all ages and will see and learn from river in a new way
- ◆ The program will provide a relationship building opportunity between youth and swiftwater rescue personnel



PROJECT COMPONENTS

- ◆ River Safety and Awareness (Age 8 – 18)
- ◆ One day awareness in river training for adults
- ◆ In-school assemblies
- ◆ Community safety forums
- ◆ In-river experiential training
 - ◆ Half-day to two and a half days
 - ◆ Youth
 - ◆ Youth leadership groups
 - ◆ Families
- ◆ RiverSense for River Communities – DVD

CLASS MODEL (5 Levels – awareness to instructor training)

- ◆ 15 – 20 participants (two swiftwater rescue professionals as instructors)
- ◆ A 2 – 4 hour classroom segment using dialogue, lecture, film clips, scenarios and story
- ◆ Half day to two full days learning in and engaging with river
- ◆ Role playing scenarios and practicing

SAMPLE CLASS OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Increase **knowledge** about swiftwater, such as:
 - ◆ *Water temperature impact*
 - ◆ *River dynamics*
 - ◆ *River hazards*
 - ◆ *Using throw bags and ropes safely*
- ◆ Increase river **awareness, safety strategies and self rescue** on the river

So that

participants can make responsible, wise choices
and
respond effectively around swiftwater

- ◆ Develop a greater **capacity** to:
 - ◆ *Evaluate “self” and self-response in water (if you are cold – LISTEN)*
 - ◆ *Deal with peer pressures*
 - ◆ *Make good decisions in a group around swift water*
 - ◆ *Use individual and collective strengths*
 - ◆ *Communicate boldly and listen well*
 - ◆ *Seek feedback*
- ◆ Leave the course “seeing” river in a new way

RESULTS FROM THE FIRST TWO YEARS:

Trained just under 100 youth, ages 6 – 18 in river

Comments:

What did I learn from the whole RiverSense experience? Besides just common sense and things to look out for, I now understand just how powerful a river is. It is the unknown that not only frightens us, but on the water, it's what drowns us. It isn't how strong you are, it's all about knowing how to handle certain situations. It would be like claiming you can win at chess because you can do 100 pushups! I learned and experienced the power of a river and have gained a new confidence in my survival ability. (15 year old participant)

I have never been more proud of my two sons (11 and 9) than I was last summer. Watching their faces as they not only faced their fears of the force of the river but then overcome those fears with strength and a new found intelligence. I know my boys learned so much about how to look differently at a river - the power, the dangers, and how to avoid them. But I also know they have new found confidence (but not over confidence) in their skills. It was an excellent class and I was never once concerned for their safety as the level of attention from the staff was outstanding. I loved this class for my boys and I look forward to having my oldest son in the class this summer and evangelizing river safety via your classes to my friends' kids. Thank you, thank you, thank you! (Parent of 9 and 11 year old participants)

My daughter has an awareness of the river she didn't have before. When the floods hit this winter, I walked with her by the river and she talked about what she had learned in her class. She talked about strainers and the power of the water against them; how she learned to avoid them if possible and strategies to use if she couldn't; the power of eddy fences; and how the floods change the river. (Parent of 15 year old participant)

I sent my son to your class because he was going to be white water rafting with this BS Troop and I was nervous. Well, he went with lots more confidence and I didn't worry at all. I think it is an important message to get out! (Parent of 13 year old participant)

My 10 year old son took the RiverSense course last summer and loved it. Not only did he have a great time, he came away with invaluable awareness of the Snoqualmie River's forces. We spend a lot of time on the river in the summer and he was able to relay good information on to our family about what he learned in the course. I'm confident he learned how to handle a situation where the river over takes you, but am not over confident in that he'll be signed up again this summer along with his sister. What a great program! I wish you the best with this important program... (Parent of 10 year old participant)

My 13 year old son has gained a greater appreciation and respect for rivers through his participation in RiverSense. During the flooding this winter we went down to see the swollen river and he commented about the dangers inherent below the surface. He wondered about strainers and the hazards of being caught in a flood. If anything, it

has made him think before he acts and he is more cautious in his decision making. (Parent of 13 year old participant)

Both of my kids learned about respecting the river and its strength. They realized they can only survive if they are educated on the river and its obstacles. We will want to repeat the class in a few years to remind them, I'm sure! (Parent of 10 and 12 year old participants)

With the South Fork of the Snoqualmie River within walking distance of our home, my girls have grown up playing, swimming, rafting, tubing and kayaking in the river. My husband and I have always had a very healthy respect for the power of the river, and after experiencing the terror of being caught in a large strainer during a family rafting trip a few years ago, I know how quickly an accident on the river can occur. The lure of the river on a sunny day is irresistible, but a fast-moving early summer river is extremely dangerous. Our 10- and 12-year-old daughters took the RiverSense class last summer and gained a new understanding of how the river's currents flow and how to be safer in the water. Experiencing conditions firsthand in the current increased their confidence. While this class does not take the place of adult supervision, learning how to "read" the river was invaluable information for not only my children, but myself as well. A classroom version of the RiverSense program should be offered to all school-age children in the spring to help prevent tragedies on our rivers. (Parent of 10 and 12 year old participants)

HISTORY

The vision of the RiverSense Project was started in the Snoqualmie Valley as a grass roots community program to teach river safety and citizenry to youth by Viki (Vic) Okerlund, a parent and active community member. The actual program took shape when she found and partnered with Chris Jonason, owner of Wave Trek Rescue, to design and pilot the first class of 14 youth in 2005. The program is the first of its kind in that it teaches river awareness and safety "in river" (as opposed to "on river") using the swiftwater rescue model. The program grew significantly the second year, training over 80 youth in river and gaining wide visibility in the community.

Vic and Chris are currently working collaboratively to develop a delivery model that, in addition to in river classes, incorporates in to the program:

- school assemblies,
- a river awareness, safety and scenario DVD (with curriculum),
- partnerships with local rescue, water safety and educational organizations.

It is the hope of both women that this project can be a model program for other river communities and that it can be delivered in an accessible and affordable way to youth and families in river communities. It is also their hope that this program can grow, through partnerships, to incorporate other elements of "river citizenry".