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PHOTOS BY ALISON RYNCARZ

UP A RIVER WITH A PADDLE



Elon's kayaking professor aims to reconnect students with nature

Chris Mench

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

How many times do people really notice the sun come up, or the birds fly around?" asks Joe Jacobs. To him, this is what's really important in life.

As the founder of the kayaking and canoeing program at Elon University and owner of the Haw River Canoe and Kayak Co. in Saxapahaw, N.C., Joe (as his students affectionately call him) is more in tune with nature than most. He views paddling as a form of therapy. "It's my 'in' to being connected to the rhythms of the earth," he said.

Joe's love of paddling dates back to his childhood in Louisiana. "Wilhelmina Williams," he recalls. "She lived on the other side of the Mississippi River from me when I was 8 or so." One day he decided to try and paddle an old drifting telephone pole across the river with a 2-by-4 to meet her. "Naturally, I didn't get very far. Telephone poles tend to roll a lot."

Nonetheless, after a trip downstream and a wet bus ride back home, he found himself drawn to the water. He was enrolled in a canoeing course the next week. Nowadays he has a real boat (quite a few of them, in fact) and a real commitment to help preserve the environment. He's starting by trying to dispel the "environmentalist" image.

"In my town growing up, if you cared about the environment you had to be a pot-

smoking hippie from California," he said. "I'm trying to show people that good conservation is good business, and good business is good conservation."

Joe's goal has always been the same: to instill in young people a love for the outdoors. "We're almost like pimps," he claims with a chuckle. "But what we're pimping is nature." It was for this reason that he partnered with Elon University.

"There's such a sense of potential in the students. They find something they're passionate about and they just go for it," he said. Joe hopes that for at least a few students, that passion will be for the natural world.

This is indicative of Joe's approach to environmentalism. A marine biologist and the former Head of Science for the Nature Conservancy's Southeast Region, he realized a long time ago that "everything we were doing wouldn't make a dime's worth of difference if I didn't get people to care about the environment." From this revelation came both his business and his classes, with their main goal being to help reconnect people with nature.

"I just love being around [the students] and sharing something I love to do; getting out into nature and getting there in a boat."

For Joe, the natural world is a lot more than just a business opportunity. "I'm not religious," he claims, "but I think I'm spiri-

tual. I view creation as a continuum, and you can either be a part of that life force in a conscious, respectful way, or an unconscious, disrespectful way. I'm trying to get people to understand that."

He's already succeeded with Jake Matheny. A guide at the Haw River Canoe and Kayak Co., Alamance County native, and one of Joe's former students, Matheny said, "Joe has taught me some of the most valuable lessons in life, one that stands out more than any: Show yourself and everyone around you how amazing our natural world is."

It's clear that Joe's worldview has rubbed off on him. "Joe gave me the tools I needed to really find myself," Matheny said. "Many people are very concerned with being comfortable, too comfortable. Get uncomfortable, and start doing it immediately. Leave from the trailhead with nothing. Everything you need is within your soul, on the ground, or in the water. That is all there really is to it."

For Joe, hearing answers like this is a validation of his life's work. "My father never even graduated high school," he said. "But he always told me one thing. He said to do what you love, to love what you do, and to deliver more than you promise. There are more currencies in life than money." For Joe Jacobs, the outdoors may just be the greatest currency of all.