

Refuge education specialist honored with Sense of Wonder Award

by Candace Ward



Michelle Ostrowski

Kenai Refuge environmental educator Michelle Ostrowski was honored this week as the Alaska winner of the Sense of Wonder Award sponsored by the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS). Michelle was recognized for her skills as a teacher who has created innovative programs connecting people with wildlife and natural resources on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Over the last twelve years, Michelle has organized and presented numerous campfire, nature walk, and discovery hike programs, as well as training and mentoring forty seasonal interpreters. In 2005, she was the first USFWS employee in Alaska to become a Certified Interpretive Guide under the auspices of the National Association of Interpretation.

Michelle has employed her skills as a graphic artist in the Refuge Outreach Program by creating a variety of brochures, flyers, posters, and bulletin board displays. She has been a driving force in Refuge “Family Fun Days” which has an annual attendance of over 1200 people, as well as organizing booths and displays at numerous community events from Sports Shows to Safe Kids activities. For the latter, Michelle received the 2008 Partner of Excellence Award from the Safe Kids of Alaska Program.

Michelle and her colleagues host about 3,000 stu-

dents each year for environmental education programs. She was instrumental in creating nine Refuge-specific environmental education units for elementary grades, three units specifically for Home School students, and six wildlife check-out kits for educators. Michelle has received three USFWS Challenge Cost Share Grants to expand environmental education programs with local organizations, and she has trained and mentored twelve education interns over the last three years.



Last summer Michelle launched the Refuge's first Summer Camp Program for 4th/5th graders. In this week-long outdoor day camp, kids had lots of fun with "hands on" learning about Alaska's plants and wildlife. Michelle received a USFWS "Connecting People with Nature" Award for this new program.

Michelle is currently pursuing a satellite Masters Degree in education from Lesley University, with the expectation of integrating art with science to improve the Refuge's nature education programs. Michelle's commitment and enthusiasm to share nature with the kids of our community in fun, innovative ways makes her very deserving of the special recognition brought

by the 2009 Alaska Region Sense of Wonder Award.

Deputy Refuge Manager Doug Staller summed it up well by saying, "Michelle is everything I think the Sense of Wonder award winner should be. She's an on-the-ground provider of programs. She's creative, enthusiastic and infuses others with a passion for sharing the natural world." Great job, Michelle!

Candace Ward has worked at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for twenty five years and has been honored to be Michelle Ostrowski's supervisor and colleague for twelve years. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.