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Whitewater: The thrills will sweep you away

Enthusiasts are reeled in by the excitement of the rapids

(June 24, 2007) — For decades, Art Miller has talked — make that preached — about the many joys of whitewater kayaking.

How plunging over a waterfall or shooting Class IV rapids is to experience Mother Nature's amusement park flume ride.

How successfully navigating a slalom course leaves the kayaker not only drenched in water, but sweat from having maneuvered these stubby boats so skillfully.

How those experiencing the adrenalin rush of being one with their boats, water and nature are often heard to utter, "Hey, let's do that again."

"I never get tired of it," said Miller, one of the country's leading instructors with 35 years experience. He teaches whitewater kayaking at three varied facilities in the Rochester region that he has helped develop.

At 63, the retired Kodak motion picture engineer and grandfather from Macedon is enjoying an endless run of raging water, operating Kayak Adventures. "We're never home but we're having fun," Art said. "We're getting an awful lot of people of all ages whitewater kayaking, and that's been our goal all along."

Miller is a friendly man, with a terrific smile, whose passion for his sport sucks you in like a whirlpool.

Monica Keller - Rochester School for the Deaf



Art Miller leading the schools river trip.



The region's only certified Junior Olympics development coach for the U.S.A Canoe and Kayak Association is so good at getting the word out about whitewater kayaking, even those who can't hear have gotten his message loud and clear.

Miller recently concluded another month-long beginners course at Rochester School for the Deaf, teaching the basics of paddling and safety to six student-athletes.

Starting in the school's pool with baby strokes, the students rapidly improved and capped their whitewater experience with an exhilarating two-hour session on the Genesee River at Rochester Canoe and Kayak Park, located directly below RSD's St. Paul Street address.

Flowing through a hidden city wilderness known mostly to fishermen walking down a road from Seth Green Drive, the 1-year-old facility dubbed "Rock Park" is the latest brainchild of Miller's. This stretch of the Genesee below the Driving Park Bridge contains Class I to Class III whitewater year-round for about 1,500 feet. Miller's jaw dropped when a friend told him to take a look.

That set in motion a marvelous convergence of paperwork and handshakes involving outdoors-minded officials from Rochester Gas and Electric, Frontier Communications, Liberty Underground and the city.

With the help of 100 volunteers, Rock Park opened in the spring of 2006 with a storage facility, widened access path, and an ingenious cable system to hang slalom gates.

"People comment all the time, 'I can't believe we're standing in the middle of the city,'" Miller said. "A coach couldn't find a more ideal location to teach whitewater kayaking."

And Rochester School for the Deaf students couldn't be in a better location to learn. They can walk to Rock Park. Athletic director Mary Cook said Miller's kayaking class complements the full slate of traditional sports offered at the school.

"The kids love it," said Cook, who, with physical education teacher Scott Lipitz, assisted Miller in their own kayaks, communicating his instructions through sign language.

"At first, some were a little tentative. But Art, he relates so well with the kids, jokes and makes it enjoyable. He's always preaching this is a lifetime sport. It stresses fitness, socialization, and we've got a resource right in our own back yard."

During a pool session, Miller instructed the students in 360-degree turns, an intricate paddle stroke called a "side slip" and what to do when you're about to tip.

"If tipping, do not let go of the paddle and use your hands," Miller said through his interpreters. "You will go in and there are lots of lovely fish in the water who will give you a kiss."

With smiles, the students laughed.

But the tone was also serious because safety is paramount in whitewater kayaking. In perfecting the "wet exit," RSD students learned not to panic when upside down in a boat. Miller said that when a person's fear is conquered, the learning begins.

"You have to find your comfort zone," he said. "You need to get rid of the myth that if you're upside down in a boat you can't get out. Gravity and water do a great job."

His students learned well.

Esau Price, 18, of Syracuse (RSD has students from 22 surrounding counties) masterly executed a bow move to right himself after rolling over.

"You don't want to panic and choke under the pressure," Price said through RSD staff member Frank Kruppenbacher. "You learn to be in control when kayaking. I'm much more confident. It feels good."

Monica Keller, 17, of Webster felt the same way as she performed various paddle strokes, making it look easy. Miller loves her potential.

"He's a great teacher. I've learned a lot, all of his moves," Keller said. "He's fun and supportive. He knows how to communicate with us because he's very animated."

For a person who is deaf, sight takes on added significance in athletics. A deaf athlete develops a keen focus.

"Definitely the eyes," Keller said. "Visually, it's easier for us. That's how we're in control. You look where you want to go."

Instructing at RSD for the past dozen years has opened Miller's eyes and been incredibly fulfilling, the Rochester Institute of Technology grad said. He doesn't do it for the money, getting about \$20 a class while supplying all the gear, towing his kayaks behind his maroon minivan.

"But I've gained tons out of it," he said. "I don't sign so I have to find new ways to get them to do what it is I want. It's made me a better teacher."

Miller enjoys passing on his whitewater knowledge to those of all ages, but in particular to young people.

"Kids get into it," he said. "They haven't had a lot of failures in life. Adults are too afraid of failing."

Miller, who has instructed scores of nationally ranked kayakers, teaches almost every day. Rock Park. The Monroe Community College Aquatic Center. The Cascade Falls Competition Center at the Keuka Outlet, where advanced kayakers go to play.

After seeing his health caught in an eddy called diverticulitis the past five years, Miller is pill-free, robust and feeling well again. That's splendid news for the whitewater community.

"This sport, I love it," Miller said. "There's so much self-esteem building. Even the kids who struggled a bit, they found things about themselves to feel good about."

They received Miller's message loud and clear.