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**PAST DEADLINE COLUMN
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An inspiring week of archaeology

I never cease to be amazed by the power of education, the willingness of volunteers and the generosity of community.

Those three elements combined are a powerful force!

For the fifth time since 2004 I have had the good fortune to be part of an amazing experience bringing education, volunteerism and community together in an inspiring way.

The Friends of Murphys Point Park's Archaeo Apprentice program, a week-long archaeological excavation for Grade 5 students, took place last week.

Conceived almost 10 years ago, archaeology seemed like a bit of a dream for a small organization like the Friends. (I've been involved with the group since it formed in 1995, so I'm gonna wax rhapsodic for a bit. I'm a little attached.)

Nevertheless, a committee formed and a group of talented volunteers assembled to make a public education program for young people happen.

We raise money in the community. Year after year we have received support from local businesses, service clubs, municipalities, individuals and corporate sponsors. Sometimes we jump into frozen rivers on New Year's Day, too.

Each year close to 150 students get to excavate at an historic homestead and saw mill site on Hogg Bay (off of Big Rideau Lake) and unearth the very tools and dishes the pioneers used.

For some local kids with deep roots in this area, they are touching things their own ancestors might have handled.

How cool is that?

They learn from a crew of professional, licensed (real!) archaeologists how to conduct the excavation. The things the students find are cleaned and catalogued, and then the archaeologists assemble the information into an official report as required by the provincial Ministry of Culture.

This is the real thing.

The students who have worked on this site should be proud because not only is this a real, licensed dig, but they have helped us to solve

mysteries about the site. We have learned the existing restored homestead is not the original house – there is evidence of an earlier building. We've confirmed there was a blacksmith shop servicing the mill. We know there was lots of activity at a structure that may have been a bunkhouse for the mill workers.

Through all this digging and solving of mysteries led by the archaeologists stands an equally devoted team of volunteers.

This past week, rain or shine, they came day after day to help children with activities in the on-site lab and at the excavation units. At the beginning of the week they set up enough shelters to keep everyone dry in the event of rain, and at the end they disassembled this tent city and let dozens of tarps dry in the sun that finally appeared.

Again and again I am amazed by how willing this group is to do the work. From patiently and quietly helping a child to assemble fragments of an artifact to hoisting shelter frames and lugging boxes around the site, this bunch is enthusiastic, energetic and fun.

By the end of the Archaeo Apprentice week I stand in awe of many other things, too.

One is the continued positive reception by the students, teachers and parents who participate in the day-long field trip. I've seen many rambunctious 10-year-olds settle down at a unit and meticulously excavate around tree roots and rocks for nearly two hours to uncover a "treasure": whether it's a fragment of a bottle, a horseshoe nail wrought by a blacksmith or even some bits of shingle or mortar.

It's a sight to behold. I can't tell you how many times I've heard a parent say, "Wow. I wish we'd had field trips like this when I was a kid."

I'm in awe of the crew: Most of the archaeologists return year after year to teach young people about how their profession truly helps us to understand our history – and so much more.

The park staff throw themselves into making this a successful project, from site preparation and logistical support to interpretation of features on the site.

And, of course, the community has repeatedly supported this unique approach to educating students in a meaningful, tangible and interesting way.

To all of you – from organizers and volunteers to funders to participants – I say thank you.