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## COMMUNITY

# Dads, daughters find way to bond

Adventure program aims to bolster relationship through challenges, teamwork

By ELIZABETH LANGTON  
Special Contributor

On a recent sunny Sunday afternoon, 12-year-old Emily Westerheide and her father, Jeff, traipsed through knee-high grass in Moss Park while carefully counting their steps and keeping their eyes on a compass.

Around them, about 60 other participants in the High Adventure Treks for Dads and Daughters orienteering outing followed similar, unmarked paths through the park.

The day's mission was compass reading, but HATS founder Kipp Murray explained that the lesson goes beyond physical navigation. It teaches something about life's journey.

"There are going to be times later in these girls' lives when they know the direction they want to go, but it's their dad who knows the map," he said. "Orienteering is something the girls and dads will look back on at those times and remember that if they don't talk to each other, one person is going to be lost.

"By talking and working together as a team, they'll get through to their destination."

HATS, a nonprofit organization, promotes father-daughter relationships through activities such as canoeing, rock climbing, mountain biking and backpacking, Mr. Murray said.

"We started the whole process thinking we'd teach the girls outdoor skills," he said. "Those were just the vehicles that taught us to communicate."

Emily, a sixth-grader at Moss Haven Elementary, said she knows she and her father share a special bond. Many of her classmates complain that they spend little time with their fathers because of busy work and travel schedules, Emily said.

"I think it's really cool that my dad does all those things, too, but he sets aside that stuff and comes with

## FAMILY TIME

For information about High Adventure Treks for Dads & Daughters, visit [www.highadventuretreks.org](http://www.highadventuretreks.org), e-mail [info@highadventuretreks.org](mailto:info@highadventuretreks.org) or call 214-341-7630.



RICK GERSHON/Special Contributor

**Emily Lewis, 11, and her father, Warren Lewis, learn how to use a compass during a High Adventure Treks for Dads and Daughters training session in Dallas.**

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me." Mr. Murray established HATS in 1996 after an 11-day Boy Scout backpacking trip with his son. Sitting atop the 12,800-foot peak of New Mexico's Mount Phillips, Mr. Murray said, he longed to share like experiences with his daughter, Megan.

"We wanted to be close to our children and be hands-on parents," said his wife, Gwen Murray. "It's more than driving them to soccer practice and watching them play. This is the vehicle he chose."

HATS started with 10 father-daughter teams when Ms. Murray was a sixth-grader. Three years later, the group had grown to about 140 teams. About 240 teams now participate.

Texas A&M sophomore Brittany Neely said she fondly remembers conversations she shared with her father in tents, canoes and cars during her HATS years.

"You talk about everything from God to sports to the new dress I wanted to buy," she said. "We wouldn't have had time to have those conversations if we hadn't made those times. ... Even now, I call my dad up and say I need boyfriend advice. How many girls can say that?"

Each year from fifth grade to eighth grade, the girls and their dads go on two weekend outings focused on one activity. The program culminates with a nine-day "High Adventure Trek" in the ninth grade.

"The elements just facilitate the communication," said David Briggs, whose 12-year-old daughter, Haleigh, started with HATS two years ago. "There's a benefit to spending time away from the TV and other distractions."

Haleigh, a seventh-grader at Lake Highlands Junior High, said she enjoys the one-on-one time.

"It's not so much the nature part," she said. "It's being with your dad."

The group meets about once a month. The get-togethers could

focus on outdoor activities, social events or life skills training, such as car care.

David Kent, who went through the program with his now college-age daughter, said HATS is different from other youth programs because it requires parent and child to work as a team. Girls cannot attend without their fathers.

"Unlike some of the other programs out there, you don't turn the kids over to someone else," he said. "That forces some togetherness, but that was what I wanted. ... I saw that as a very positive attribute."

Ms. Murray, now a 20-year-old sophomore at Texas Tech, said the interaction gave her strength at a time in life when young girls can be plagued by self-doubt and peer pressure.

"I was really excited that my dad wanted to do stuff with me," she said. "I became more responsible; I had higher self-esteem."

Mr. Murray said he clearly recalls the moment he saw his daughter's strength emerge. During their ninth-grade trip to Colorado, the group embarked on a high ropes course. Balancing on a wire 25 feet above the ground, Mr. Murray said he felt a wave of fear and hesitated.

"Just in that two or three seconds, our roles flipped. She became the leader; she became the adult; she became the comforter. And I was the one who needed all that," Mr. Murray said.

Eventually, Mr. Murray said, he hopes to see HATS expand across Texas and the nation. He expects membership to top 1,000 teams within 18 months. He continues to lead the core group but wants to train leaders to start groups in

communities throughout the area, he said.

Although Ms. Murray's school schedule limits her participation as a mentor in HATS activities, she and her father still take camping trips and hikes when time allows, she said.

"I learned how to communicate with him. So all through high school, when so much is going on in a girl's life, I knew how to talk to him," she said. "It's a relationship that lasts longer than HATS."

"It's a bond that lasts a lifetime," Mr. Murray said.

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