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Devan shot his first deer at 10 years old while hunting with his dad.
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An urban teen with a taste for the outdoors

Meet Milwaukee's Devan Jenkins.

Marcus Smith

How do you make a love of the outdoors relevant or foster an appreciation for it? It begins, as with so many things, with a supportive family.

For Devan Jenkins that's the case. Devan, a 13-year-old African-American from Milwaukee, is already seasoned in the sports of fishing and deer hunting.

"The thing I remember was the first time he went fishing," recalls Tasha Jenkins, Devan's mom. "He was about 5 or 6 and I thought we would be fishing for a couple of hours and he would lose his patience and he would be ready to go. But it turned out he was out there all day and enjoyed fishing, so I knew that was something that he would want to continue to do and he has done that."



A spring fishing trip with dad yields big results.
© Marvin Jenkins

Today, Devan has a favorite fishing spot in Beaver Dam and likes to catch bass "because they give a fight when you catch 'em."

Devan also has been around rifles since he was 10, even hunting in Arkansas with his dad, which is where he bagged his first deer. Devan can clearly describe the differences between how hunters dress a deer in Arkansas and how they do it in Wisconsin.

Like many young people (and adults) Devan has taken part in the DNR's Learn to Hunt program. The program was created to address trends indicating a decline in the number of hunters in the future and to keep the tradition alive.

The program has a list of ambitious goals including increasing the number of Learn to Hunt participants by 5 percent. It's working. In fact, the number of Learn to Hunt participants increased by 23 percent from 2012 to 2013, with 2,637 hunters attending a Learn to Hunt event in 2013. The department is also moving forward with more multicultural Learn to Hunt events to boost participation among diverse populations.

Tasha believes in the importance of the Learn to Hunt program in fostering an appreciation of outdoor recreation for city kids like Devan. "It gives them a chance to get exposed and learn things that they normally wouldn't get exposed to growing up in the city," she says.

At the urging of Natural Resources Board (NRB) Chairman Preston Cole, Devan testified at the NRB's June meeting in Milwaukee. Devan thanked the board for holding the meeting in Milwaukee.

"I think it's important that you hear from people like me," he said. "I think it's great that the Department of Natural Resources is doing so much to support kids in the community with fishing clinics and Learn to Hunt programs. I hope you keep up the good work."

Devan added, "Because of my love for the outdoors, I would like to be part of the Youth Conservation Congress. I would appreciate your help in making that happen."

One of the people in that audience was Rob Bohmann, chairman of the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, who approached Devan and his mom and offered to mentor Devan in his quest to be part of the youth congress, an NRB-developed initiative.

"I talked to Devan briefly after the meeting about his interest in natural resources, discussed his favorite pastime — he said that was fishing — and I told him that as chair of the Congress, I attend many of the committee meetings and that he is more than welcome to come to any of the meetings that I will be attending," recalls Bohmann.

In fact, the Department of Natural Resources, the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, and parents and kids like Tasha and Devan Jenkins are coming together to work to maintain Wisconsin's rich outdoor traditions and are pushing to increase African-American participation in them.

"It starts with parents being motivated," Tasha suggests. "The people I know who hunt or fish tend to be older. I haven't noticed the younger generation of parents really even participating in those activities themselves, so it's hard for them to pass that interest on to their kids. But I think exposing kids to the outdoors, regardless of whether the parents do it or not, gives young people the opportunity to see something and experience something that they actually might like and may want to continue, but had not considered before."

Devan has advice for his peers when it comes to this topic: "Get out and try new things, 'cause that might be what you like to do in the future."

Building participation among African-Americans

It's another busy Saturday at the A and C Live Bait shop on the edge of Milwaukee's Harambee neighborhood. In between sips of coffee, customers buy night crawlers, discuss where the fish are biting and prognosticate about the success of upcoming fishing trips. On this visit, like many over past years, the clientele are middle age and elderly African-American anglers.

But as they socialize among themselves, they're also hopeful that they won't be alone in their outdoor pursuits and that they've already inspired their daughters, sons, nieces, nephews and grandchildren to join them at the family fishing hole.

They know that Wisconsin's fishing and hunting industries are counting on them to help keep those traditions alive and that the key to a healthy outdoor economy is increased participation by people from all walks of life, including an urban audience such as Milwaukee and its large community of African-Americans.

Richard Aiken, a natural resource economist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, helps prepare the National Survey of Hunting, Fishing, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation. The survey, issued every five years, began in 1990 and shows that not much has changed since it started in the area of African-American outdoor recreation participation rates, so there is still a lot of work to be done.

"I looked at participation rates (for African-Americans)," Aiken says, "and it was 10 percent in 1991, and is still 10 percent in our most recent survey (2011) for fishing and hunting."

Aiken adds, "Compare that to the total participation rate (in hunting and fishing) in the country for the average American at 16 percent."

What accounts for a stubborn 10 percent participation rate among African-Americans? When you speak with people who work in the field of outdoor recreation you hear common themes: lack of access and too few youth mentors.

Charles Young, regional manager for youth programs for the Pacific West region of the National Park Service explains that African-Americans "just haven't had the resources or the education around outdoor recreation the way mainstream America has. It's an issue of not knowing where to go, not understanding the type of gear and not really having some of the resources."

Young works with African-American kids from south Los Angeles and says that to get more black youth outdoors, you have to understand their experiences. He argues that trying to link the relevance of a John Muir personality to these kids won't work.

"These kids don't know who John Muir was," Young says. "But if we go and say 'This is the first nature trail ever built by Charles Young (the first black superintendent of a national park), or if we say black folks were some of the first rangers in the United States, that's very different. You have to interpret the area so that there's some relevance."

Inner City Sportsmen Club is helping closer to home

One group working to build the next generation of outdoor enthusiasts in Wisconsin is the Inner City Sportsmen Club. Founded in 2011, the Milwaukee-based club has nearly 60 members consisting of young and old alike.

"We hadn't seen anything in the city like it so we just decided to start it," says club president Reggie Hayes.

DNR's Southeast District staff is involved with the group, from providing speakers at the club's monthly meetings to being active members.

"We have met with some of the DNR people who lead Learn to Hunt programs," says Hayes. "We also had six of our club members take hunter safety courses to become instructors. So we're positioning ourselves to get the tools to start advertising to bring more young people in."

The club's long range plans include partnering with organizations that serve urban youth and reaching out to the elderly with church groups interested in linking up with the club.

Growing up in Baton Rouge, La., Hayes appreciates the value of family and its role in fostering a love of the outdoors at an early age. He started hunting when he was 9 years old and remembers his hunting group would often consist of uncles, fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers.

"Sometimes there would be three or four generations out there hunting and fishing with us," says Hayes.

The tradition starts young.

The Inner City Sportsmen Club meets at 6 p.m. on the second Monday of each month at DNR's Southeast District Headquarters, 2300 N. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, Milwaukee. Contact the club by sending an email to icscmke@gmail.com or calling (414) 502-7025. New members and visitors are welcome.