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Take it outside, MOMS

By KELI SIPPERLEY



The moment I turn onto the road rambling through the Ocala National Forest, I feel it. My grip on the steering wheel loosens. I breathe a little deeper. Drive a little slower. By the time we set out to gather saw palmettos for a boondoggle craft session at this Becoming An Outdoor Woman event, I'm practically putty in Jeanene Arrington's hands.

"Taste this," she says, holding out a freshly cut palmetto stalk.

I take a small bite.

Not bad. A little bitter. "You could live on this if you had to," she tells me.

"Great. But can you make beer out of it?" I ask.

(The answer is no. I make a mental note to never, ever get lost in the woods.)

If you talk to Arrington, chances are she'll tell you to take a hike. Or suggest what you really need is a good paddling. And if you're anything like me — a harried keeper of kids, chaos and never-ending laundry — she's right.

She founded Not A Clue Adventures in 2008, "to teach people how to go outside and play," she says.

The idea was simple. And came on the heels of one of many trips she'd already spearheaded for friends.

"We had just gotten done with a tubing trip ... I told my friend, 'I need to just start a business doing this, taking all you crazy people out to play, for all the people who don't have a clue,'" Arrington says. "I sat there for the next 30 minutes and put the whole company together in my head."

As a volunteer instructor with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Becoming An Outdoor Woman (BOW) program, which offers three weekend retreats annually in Florida, Arrington says she met many women eager to learn new skills.

The BOW workshops teach women how to camp, hunt and shoot, fish. But participants often gain something even more valuable.

"The self-confidence just from doing any of these skills transforms their whole life ... they think, 'You know what? If I can do this, I can handle my kids, and I can handle my job and I can handle the traffic.' That's the biggest thing they get," says Lynne Hawk, BOW state coordinator.

But BOW can offer only so many workshops. Arrington saw a need for more. So she filled it.

Business boomed quickly, primarily by word-of-mouth. Her first group camping trips filled up immediately.

Not A Clue Adventures now offers a full calendar of group trips in addition to individual services, from guided half-day hikes to full concierge camping: Just show up with clothes and Arrington will bring the equipment and the food and take care of everything, including set up, meal preparation, and guided activities.

As a certified Center For Outdoor Ethics Leave No Trace instructor, Arrington also teaches her clients to minimize their impact on the areas they visit.

"I take beginners, people who are interested in camping, hiking, kayaking, fishing, canoeing, and I show them the skills," she says. "I teach them what I know, give them a good base to start on, so they're more comfortable and able to go out on their own in the future."

Many of her clients are single mothers who want to take their children camping or fishing but don't have the equipment or know-how. She also works with families who would rather spend a weekend enjoying each other's company than stockpiling tents and sleeping bags, packing up groceries, and setting up camp for a weekend.

"If a family only wants to camp once a year, they shouldn't have to go out and buy \$400 worth of gear," Arrington says.

Then there's the Girls' Night Out package: Get a bunch of women out by a campfire, she says, and the fun really starts. No makeup or hair products required.

Though she puts in 60 hours a week at her "real" job as an administrator at a law firm, 45-year-old Arrington is nothing short of a weekend dynamo. Quick with a laugh and full of energy, I'd known her five minutes before it seemed I'd known her all my life.

The grandmother of three says her love of the outdoors has its roots in the nature and hunting books her estranged father left behind when she was young. Though her relationship with him was negligible while she was growing up, the impact those books had on her has guided her through adulthood. Her passion is unmistakable.

And her enthusiasm is contagious. It's easy to see why many of Arrington's clients come back — and tell their friends. She is a beacon for anyone who yearns for the plain, old-fashioned fun of playing outside.

"She is one of my inspirations to do more. I don't know how she does it," says Darlene Shouse, 52, of Jacksonville.

As we walk the grounds of the Ocala National Forest Conservation Center and Youth Camp, Arrington shares the stories of some of the people she's worked with. The children who, astonished by her tent-assembling speed, called her "magic." The little boy who told her he'd never been in a real forest before. The women who came out to camp as "divas" and went home with fire in their eyes. The ones who'd lost someone, and just needed some space.

"People heal out here," Arrington says, her eyes filling briefly.

"You realize it's not all about me when you do something like this."