Into the wild: Students work with Steger to build their dreams

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Star Tribune
August 2, 2014 - 11:28 PM

ELY, Minn. - Go east out of Ely, past the gas station and the Wolf Center, leaving any semblance of civilization behind. Dirt roads narrow end giant potholes rattle your chassis for miles. You turn down the long driveway, past a gate and a sign that warns to watch for dog snares.

The forest opens to gardens, an enclave of small wooden buildings and an makeshift "lodge," old furniture scattered on the porch. Then you see it, atop a tall hill, like some glass and wood Rubik's Cube crowned with turrets and circled by ornate walkways. Miles from the nearest neighbor, it looks wildly incongruous and completely organic.

This is the last dream of polar explorer Will Steger, a quiet, 25-year project to create a magical retreat for the world's best thinkers. Someday, he hopes, those people will come here to solve problems grand and small. Secluded far from distractions and surrounded by some of the most stunning wilderness in the world, experts in agriculture, education, poverty of anything else will be able to gather and come up with solutions to society's most vexing issues.

But first, Steger has to finish his quixotic quest. He needs money, attention and help.

That's where Jess Hill and Jermaine Rundies, recent graduates of Summit Academy OIC, come in. Summit, a north Minneapolis, teaches skills in health care and building trades to unemployed or underemployed people in poor neighborhoods to help them find good jobs that get them off public assistance.

Hill and Rundies were part of the teams this summer that traveled to Steger's compound and helped him construct one of the dozen cabins on the 240-acre homestead. The work let them hone their carpentry skills while helping Steger build the dream. It also exposed many of them to the wilderness for the first time.

When Hill, 23, first saw the castle-like building, she searched for words to describe it. "It was kind of ridiculous, but beautiful," she said.

"Oh, it was gorgeous," added Rundies. "After driving over 200 potholes, I looked up and it was just crazy. It was epic."

Hill, who had camped in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness before, was wowed with Steger's land and retreat center. She said the team worked eight- to 10-hour days, "depending on how exhausted we were," then sat around a campfire and learned about one another, and about Steger and his world adventures.

They started from scratch and framed a 16-by-16-foot cabin, put in the walls and floors and added the roof. Another group will go up this month and finish the cabin.

"It's one thing to build a wall in a classroom, it's another to build an entire cabin in the outdoors and have to level it," Hill said. "I had never done a roof before."

During a tour of his grounds, Steger said he had been on boards for nonprofits with Summit's president, Louis King. They had worked on various projects to help make people in impoverished communities employable.

They decided that working on his cabins would give students a chance to build and finish a project on a small-scale, doing everything from the blueprints back in Minneapolis to the finishing touches of the tiny but efficient homes, where visitors will live while at the retreat.

"It's important for them to get a finished product so they can see exactly what they've accomplished," said Steger, who slept in tents with participants even though he has a small cabin on the ridge overlooking his lake.

But the program isn't just about job skills. Steger said he learns about participants' lives back in the cities and the hurdles they've overcome to get there.

"One of the guys talked about how he had been homeless," Steger said. "A lot of them have never been in nature like this.

"I think their wilderness experience was just incredible," Steger added. When they arrive, "they just take it all in, the scenery, the magic of the wilderness. For some of them, it was hard to leave. They said they were sad to leave." Thus far, Steger has footed the bills for the Steger Wilderness Center (www.willsteger.com) himself, and built much of it, along with a 10-member crew. But he's been spending time in the Twin Cities lately trying to drum up more support to complete the project, which consists of the four-story retreat center and a dozen cabins. All of them are in various stages of construction, but nothing is yet completed.

As dreams go, it's pretty lofty. But so are his plans for programming.

"Generally in leadership circles, people live in silos and it's hard to communicate," said Steger. "My goal is to take groups of leaders into that magic of a wilderness setting and put them to work. It's not going to be the kind of retreat where you come up here to feel good about yourself."

"If I can pull this off," Steger said, "I could have the biggest impact of my life."
He's already had an impact on Rundlos, 29, who worked in a warehouse before getting his scholarship at Summit.

"I feel pretty lucky to be able to see it," Rundlos said. "It was frustrating at times, but at the end of the day, seeing I actually built that, it was crazy."

After work, he hiked 2 miles through the woods to a nearby lake and caught a mess of fish. They didn't have time to clean them, so he put his stringer into Steger's private lake to keep them alive.

"Aw, man, a turtle ate all 30 of them," he said. The next time, he was more careful.

Since working for Steger, both Hill and Rundlos landed jobs with Mortenson Construction, and are working on the Vikings stadium.

"The outcome is fabulous," said Rundlos. "Everything I asked for has come true. It's something I can show people. I put my sweat, and a little blood, into that."

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