Nature, unlike many things in this world, has the power to break the barriers of language and culture. That's one of the many lessons Dave Klotzle has learned over 25 years as an outdoor educator in the Peekskill City School District.

"The other day I was teaching some children from Woodside School and they were from Yemen," Klotzle said. "Talk about being out of their world. They had absolutely no English. So I put this syrup in this little girl's mouth and she looks at me in terror... and then about 30 seconds went by and she licked her lips and she looked up and she gave me a smile that I'll remember forever. She just lit up my life. There was no language necessary."

Klotzle has been taking children on nature trips, varying from simple walks through the woods to Maple sugaring lessons, since the 1970s. Doing this for so long has given Klotzle the opportunity to change the lives of many children and their perceptions about nature.

"He has a booming voice and a commanding presence," said Mary Foster, principal at Peekskill's Oakside School. "He teaches respect for the environment. The kids are told not to start gathering up pine cones and acorns and if you find a little critter, leave it alone. He really is the whole package and the kids listen to him."

Klotzle's work with the elementary schools in Peekskill gives children new learning experiences in nature. Almost every child who has attended kindergarten through third grade in Peekskill has been on one of Klotzle's field trips and the general consensus is that the kids love it,
“I think they love him because any time I say, ‘We’re gonna go see Mr. Klotzle,’ they say, ‘Yay!,'” said Shanti Urreta, a second grade teacher at Oakside School. “They love him; they love hearing his stories. He has a cute sense of humor with them.”

Although Klotzle said he loves where he has ended up in life, he never expected this to be where he would get. He got his start in the 1970s while working at Teatown Lake Reservation in Ossining, N.Y. as a barn cleaner.

“A naturalist at Teatown said, ‘There’s a group coming from the Ossining children’s center and I don’t do very well with them,’” Klotzle said. “He couldn’t relate to these kids on a nature walk. They would see a butterfly and scream in terror, they’d never been out in the woods before, they didn’t know what was going on... so I said I would take them and that’s how I started teaching kids.”

Klotzle said he chooses to teach children about nature because it’s what he enjoys, but his job is never what he planned it would be. In the 1960s Klotzle worked with runaway children as youth counselor in Boston. He had little background in outdoor education and said “none of this was planned.”

“I think that’s a truth I know about things,” Klotzle said. “You can plan whatever you want to plan and with some remarkable exceptions...most of us just end up falling into something.”

Taking children on field trips in the woods is not Klotzle’s only job. His main profession is working as a wetlands inspector in Phillipstown. Klotzle said he makes enough money as an inspector to support himself, and his job as an outdoor educator is something he can do because he enjoys it.

“I think most important is I think I lead the young people still, even though that pays me the least,” Klotzle said. “But it gratifies me the most and I think I lead them and as time goes on they are going to lead other people.”
Klotzle said the most important result of his job is the lasting impact it can have on the children.

Through his programs, Peekskill kids can learn about nature even while living in a world where TV and computers have become the main source of entertainment.

"He's been a really integral part of the Peekskill City School District and our educational experiences," Foster said.

Some children in the district are underprivileged and Klotzle's programs may provide them with a means of escape.

"Some of them have horrendous home lives and I hope I make some difference," Klotzle said.

"What any good teacher will tell you is that you're not gonna save all these children from everything, but if you plant an idea, if you get a seed going in them, that there is something you can do."
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- David Klotzle’s facebook page