

# Sticks and Stones

## Camp Teaches Survival Skills to Children

By Val Van Meter  
*The Winchester Star*



The action heats up as participants in the Primitive Living camp cooperate to build a fire without matches. Graham Siegfried (from left) holds the starter stick as Zack Loughlin and Mady Loughlin, move the bow back and forth to twirl the starter stick in the firebed. The secret to a quick start: keeping the bow level. (Photo by Val Van Meter)

The temperature was hovering in the low 90s, but that didn't keep these youngsters from working hard to start a fire. One youth appealed to the man dressed in brain-tanned deerskins. "Can you make us a coal," he asks.

Michael Sottosanti drops to one knee, puts a mullein stem into a crater in a "fireboard" of willow wood and twirls it rapidly back and forth between his hands. In just seconds, smoke is curling from the willow wood. Through a notch in the willow, Sottosanti scoops up a tiny coal on the edge of his knife and the young man departs to start a fire in a nearby grill.

"He's making smoke signals," Sottosanti said with a smile.

The first day of Frederick County Parks and Recreation Primitive Living Skills camp has begun.

Mike Sottosanti, 46, of Stephens City, got a jump start on learning to live on intimate terms with nature. When he was six years old, his parents moved to a remote part of Page County. "My father said to my mother, 'You're always talking about wishing you'd lived 100 years ago. Do you want to try it?'" Trying it included living in a house with no indoor plumbing, and living off the land for much of their food.

Sottosanti, in his turn, developed a keen interest in the technology of the Native Americans. "I was fascinated by the fact that the Indians could meet every need from the forest." At 19, Sottosanti decided to move out of the house and into the forest. He wanted to see what life would be like, living close to the land. He had two special companions, a dog and a horse. "I would ride the horse to work," Sottosanti noted. In the evenings, he would picket his horse in a meadow and unroll his sleeping back at the edge of the horse's tether, to be with him.

"When I first moved into the woods, I began to be accepted by everything that lived there," Sottosanti said. "They started trusting me." Sottosanti gave up hunting then, because he could not justify hunting the animals, which trusted him as a fellow inhabitant of the forest. He talks of walking two miles into the forest, then putting on a blindfold and finding his way back, using his senses of touch, hearing and balance. "My mental picture was so clear, I didn't feel like I wasn't seeing." Humans depend very much on their eyesight, Sottosanti said. We forget we have other senses. "If you do it long enough in a controlled environment," he says of walking blindfolded, "Your other senses will take over. Almost all senses are like muscles. You have to use them to keep them strong."



His father had started Shenandoah River Outfitters and Sottosanti worked as a guide. "It was a big help in what I do now," Sottosanti said. He learned how to prepare for trips, to meet a lot of different types of people and how to cook interesting meals for large numbers of people in primitive conditions. His skills brought him a unique opportunity. In 1996, he guided a photographer for National Geographic Magazine for a feature story on the Shenandoah. His work on the river brought him knowledge once used by paleolithic Indians, the best places to find chert and jasper, for making stone tools and points.



“I got into making arrowheads when I was very young,” Sottosanti said. “I wanted to make stone tools.” His father’s partner attended a flint knapping workshop in Colorado and found out that one of the best known stone tool experts, Scott Silby, actually lived in Front Royal. “He opened many doors for me,” Sottosanti said. Through networks of people with similar interests, Sottosanti learned bow and arrow crafting, primitive fire-making techniques and how to tan leather for clothing and equipment. “I’m still learning in leaps and bounds,” Sottosanti said. Now, he’s sharing that knowledge with youngsters.

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Although Sottosanti does custom home remodeling, and structural problem-solving for a living, he has been conducting Primitive Living camps for the Frederick County Parks and Recreation Department for six years. The first year, he did a single camp. The second year he did two. “Now, it’s my whole summer!” Sottosanti’s goal for his campers is to make them feel comfortable in the forest. He teaches many primitive technical skills, which the kids eat up, but he also hopes they learn something about getting along with each other and resolving conflicts too. Keeping 11 youngsters, ages 4 to 14, interested and learning might seem a chore, but Sottosanti said their enthusiasm keeps them working at projects, even in the heat of a 90-degree day. With time out occasionally to wet down under a hose, the youngsters select pieces of chert from Alabama and flint from Florida to pressure flake arrowheads, which they produce the way the Indians did. “What is the most fun is their enthusiasm. They make it so easy. Discipline is never a problem.” While Sottosanti says he tried to cover too much in his very first camp, now he lets the kids’ interests determine a lot of how the camp flows.

When Sottosanti explained how Indians used bones to work leather, and a camper wondered how that was done, Sottosanti brought a deer leg bone and they shaped it into the proper tool.

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The Primitive Living camp includes an over night camp-out in the forest. During camp, Sottosanti sets up a box trap to show the youngsters the principals of hunting, which supplied much of the protein for Native Americans. “We usually catch a squirrel,” he said, which is then released. Sottosanti also spends some time teaching about forest plants. “I’ve studied plants for five years, and I’ve only scratched the surface,” Sottosanti said. Plants provided both food and medicine to the country’s earliest residents. Sottosanti quickly locates a common plant, most homeowners would say a weed, the broadleaf plantain. Juice from this plant can quiet the itch of poison ivy or insect bites, Sottosanti explained. “It’s great on mosquito bites,” he added, “and you can find it everywhere.” Jewel weed is another poison ivy antidote. The fleshy plant is easier to get juice from than plantain, he added. Mash the plant in a blender to get the juice, then simmer it on the stove to thicken. Store in ice cube trays and, when poison ivy strikes, pull out a cube, let it start to melt and apply. “In some camps, we just do plants,” Sottosanti said. “There is wonderful food, all round your house, that is just ignored.” Sottosanti believes in learning by doing.

“When you use it, it usually sticks,” he said. And, while some of the things he teaches have to do with survival, “I don’t think learning about nature should be a hardship.”