

M.D. vs Wild: An interview with the "AdironDoc"

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Submitted photo

Two popular TV shows on the Discovery Channel, "Man vs. Wild" and "Survivorman," focus on two survival experts and their experiences in the most adverse outdoor settings.

Now meet "AdironDoc" -- Central New York's local expert on how not to get into perilous situations.

Tom Welch is chairman of the pediatrics department at Upstate Medical Hospital. But along with all his medical licenses on his office wall, he's the proud owner of a New York State guide license. "It's for hiking, camping and climbing," he said. Welch doesn't fish or hunt.

In addition, the 62-year-old Jamesville resident is a certified wilderness educator through the Wilderness Education Association. Each summer, he holds two-week classes in a remote section of the Denali National Park in Alaska, teaching others how to survive for days "off the trail head," and how to be safe doing it. His next outdoor education class with nine students is scheduled to begin July 12.

Welch talked recently about his passion for the outdoors, guiding and his Alaskan wilderness survival classes.

You appear to be in darn good shape for your age. What's your secret?

A certain amount of it is just luck of the genetic draw. On the other hand, I'm pretty active. I run a lot. I've run more than 20 marathons. I don't smoke. I have one to two glasses of red wine a day. I take one aspirin a day. I've been a vegetarian for 30 years. I just try to live a healthy, **active life**.

How did you get into all this outdoors stuff?

It came early in my life, through Boy Scouts, growing up in Herkimer. I was an Eagle Scout. From there I went to college in Princeton, medical school at McGill University in Montreal and the University of Colorado for my residency. I really expanded my rock climbing activities while I was living in Colorado.

What about the guiding and the outdoor education classes?

I had been doing this sort of thing with friends and acquaintances all along. I think everyone needs an alternative career. A fall-back option. Also, I thought I had been doing it without credentials, for fun. That's why I got a guide's license. The next big step was the Wilderness Education Association, which provides formal certification for outdoor leaders. I went to Alaska in 1998 and spent a month in the Denali area, taking courses. I really enjoyed it.

Briefly, what do you teach in your Alaskan course? How much does it cost?

We teach a lot of very classic, hard skills. Classic map and compass navigation. We don't take a GPS. I tell people GPS is kind of like learning to drive with automatic transmission. You need to learn on a standard. We teach such things as (the proper equipment), safe campsite setups, environmental safety (the tundra is a very fragile environment) ... leadership skills ... some wilderness medicine. A major part of the first day's orientation is dedicated to grizzly bears and things that can be done to avoid coming into contact with them.

Most of all, I teach safety, so that you don't find yourself (in those situations described on the survival TV shows). The majority of problems that people run into in the wilderness are the result of bad judgment. The key to survival if you're lost in the wilderness is making sure you're warm, hydrated (you can go without food for several weeks, but can't go without water for a couple of days) -- and letting people know where you are.

The two-week course costs about \$1,500.

Have you ever been in a life-threatening situation because of bad judgment?

When I was 19 or 20, I was with a group of three other people climbing Mt. Colden in the Adirondacks in the winter, and got into a whiteout on the summit. We came down a different side in the dark. We made it back to our campsite with flashlights. We were young, had all the right equipment and skills -- but it was scary.

What's the worst medical emergency you've had to deal with out in the wild?

The reality is in the back country, the majority of injuries and illness that occur are very mundane. Seventy-five percent of evacuations in the back country are because of sprained ankles. The type of things that happen in the back country are pretty simple, medically, but the matter of accessing help and getting them out requires a lot of wilderness skills.

The only time I've had to actually carry somebody out of the back country was when I took a group of Boy Scouts to the Red River Gorge in Kentucky. A kid was sitting too near to a stove, and somebody spilled hot water and it landed on the inside of his thighs, causing second-degree burns. He couldn't walk. We had to carry him three miles out because of the injury.

On those TV survival shows, they occasionally show the stars doing dramatic things like eating nasty looking grubs for food, or drinking their own urine. Do you teach anything about that?

Most of that is bogus. For example, eating grubs and insects. The number of calories in a grub is so minimal that the amount of energy you would burn getting it, putting it your mouth and chewing it ... it's probably a wash.

As for drinking your own urine, I can tell you that's absolutely ridiculous. It's not because urine is poisonous, but because urine contains a large amount of salt. It's the same as drinking sea water. You're taking in more salt than your kidneys can excrete. It just doesn't make sense biologically. (In a survival situation,) you're better off not drinking anything than drinking your own urine.

More on the AdironDoc

Tom Welch created his "AdironDoc" Web site about 10 years ago to promote his guiding skills,

provide links to his numerous articles on wilderness survival and information about his Alaskan wilderness classes. Check out www.adironDoc.com.