

Womanquest trips are self-esteem builders

By Pam Alward

Women can and should do anything they want to do, and the outdoors is the perfect place, Womanquest Inc. Co-director Jean Vrbka said Tuesday.

Vrbka spoke as part of the "Women in Perspective" series at the Women's Resource Center in the Nebraska Union. The center is sponsoring the series.

"We (women) have a perception of the world from the man's point of view," Vrbka said. Young girls, she said, are programmed to believe they cannot do as much as boys can do, so the world becomes known as a male domain.

From grade school to high school, through all areas of experience from science and physical education classes to Girl Scouts, there is a "tremendous lack of female role models," Vrbka said.

"The message we get as girl children and as adults makes a lot of difference in how we come to understand ourselves," she said.

For six years, Vrbka designed and led outdoor trips for emotionally disturbed, disadvantaged and minority youths through the YWCA. Through this Nebraska Outdoor Encounter Program, adolescents learn to experience the outdoors, she said.

Last year she began Womanquest Inc., a Lincoln-based program which provides self-esteem-building experiences for women in classes, workshops and the outdoors. This winter's agenda includes downhill and cross country skiing, backpacking and camping in Wisconsin, Colorado and Texas.

"It provides a chance for women to know and experience their reality," Vrbka said. A Womanquest trip is something a woman does for herself, she said, to improve her feelings about herself.

Vrbka said there are obstacles that women must overcome in order to improve themselves and that the outdoor trips can help achieve this goal.

Women need to lessen the feelings of guilt they may have because they are women, she said. "Guilt immobilizes women before we can get them out in the woods where they can make a clear choice (about themselves)."

Women also need to dismiss their fears of innate inferiority, Vrbka said. "It's the original sin of being born female."

Another fear, which stems from the idea of taking an outdoor trip, is that of abandonment. Vrbka said that husbands, and even female co-workers, can cause women to feel like they are neglecting their duties when they go on a camping trip to help themselves. Women may fear that these people will abandon them because they have neglected their duties, she said. Another fear women need to conquer is that of being abandoned, she said. Husbands, and even female co-workers, lead women to feel they are neglecting their duties if they take a camping trip, Vrbka said.

In addition to spiritual and emotional improvement, backpacking increases a woman's physical strength. "We feel a strength of affirmation about our bodies," she said.

Few men understand that men's and women's outdoor experiences differ on a deep emotional level, she said.

The outdoors is important to women because "it has a very real and very rich history that's been disregarded, and we've alienated ourselves from it," Vrbka said. "We need to dig up some of the stuff women have done in the past and can do today."

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Illustration by Chris Medley

Composting brings a heap of benefits

By Kema Soderberg

Autumn leaves are pretty when they're in somebody else's yard. But piling them up and helping them to decompose brings a "heap" of beauty to next year's lawn or garden.

Wende Baker of the Small Farms Action Group said that now is the time to start a compost heap. She said fallen leaves are one of the best compost ingredients and that "consistent" fall temperatures help decomposition get off to a good start before the weather turns colder.

Baker said composting offers many benefits. Leaves can be disposed of without increased garbage hauling costs to the individual, and composting also reduces costs to the taxpayer for landfill burial.

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Besides saving money, composting is environmentally better for lawns and gardens than a more expensive chemical fertilizer, Baker said. The compost improves the cultivation of the soil so that it holds more air and trace minerals.

Well-cultivated soil also holds water longer so that the nitrogen in the compost is "less likely to leach out" than the nitrogen produced by anhydrous ammonia in commercial fertilizers. Baker said nitrogen in commercial fertilizers is less stable and can cause a nitrate pollution problem.

Compost is very economical compared with commercial fertilizers. Two local lawn and garden stores said the cost to fertilize 5,000 square feet of lawn would be between \$6.99 and \$15. Compost can be made from free leaves, grass clippings, table scraps and shredded branches. (Shredding creates more surface area resulting in quicker decomposition.) The only real expense in composting is time.

Because compost is made by micro-organisms that feed on organic material to produce the humus needed for plants, the pile manager must keep the compost environment in peak condition. According to a pamphlet produced by the Small Farms Action Group, the pile should be kept moist but not soggy and should be turned about every 10 days.

The pamphlet said temperatures within the pile can increase to 160 degrees during the decomposition process and can result in nitrogen and ammonia loss. High temperatures also can kill the micro-organisms.

Baker said it takes six to eight weeks for a compost pile to decompose. The finished product is dark, earthy and crumbly in your hand. According to the pamphlet, you should be able to spread compost on lawns and gardens by Christmas.

Contact the Small Farms Action Group, 475-5424, for further information.