

# OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Reporting on OWU Community Service Learning & Opportunities in Delaware and Beyond

Kristen Lear ~ Editor In Chief

## Bats, Science & Service Learning



A student in the bat workshop shows off his bat puppet.

"If you want to answer a question, you have to put your hands together by crossing your thumbs and flapping your hands like a bat." This is how the elementary school students in our classes learned to make "bat hands" during our presentations on bats. I spent the summer in central Texas as a research assistant studying bat ecology and their impact on agriculture, namely the pecan industry in central Texas. When I applied for the position, I knew I'd be working directly with bats all summer, which would involve going out into the pecan orchards every night to catch bats with mist nets. Mist nets are large nets that look like hair nets and are used to catch small flying animals. I was excited to have the opportunity to work with bats, and I was even more excited when I learned that we'd also visit a local elementary school to present a workshop on bats. This was an opportunity to combine my academic background in science with my love for community service in a true "service-learning" experience. Most of the commonly held misconceptions about bats begin in childhood, so teaching a bat workshop to elementary students would provide a great way for us to help kids understand the importance and uniqueness of bats.

On the day of our first workshop presentation, the other three members of the "Bat Team" (as we became known in town) and I dressed up in bat t-shirts and our headlamps to show our "batty" spirits. We received skeptical, yet curious, looks as we entered the 3rd grade classroom. We set out all our equipment, including a mist net, a thermal imaging camera, and an acoustic detector, and then we began the workshop with a quick "quiz" about bats to see how much the kids knew. As expected, a lot of them held common misconceptions about bats, including that bats are blind. (They're not.) We then gave a Power Point presentation on bats around the world and some common facts about them. The kids "oohed" and "ahhed" at all the vivid pictures of different types of bat species, and they especially loved the weird looking ones. Once the children got a better idea about the types and lifestyles of bats, we showed them how to make bat puppets out of paper bags. They loved this activity, especially the opportunity to personalize their bats by modeling them after their favorite species. At the end of the workshop we demonstrated how we use all of our equipment in our research. The thermal camera was a big hit as we panned it across the room to look at the thermal images of all the kids. When it was time to go, they begged us to stay and show them more.

We came back to the school the next day to present the workshop to the 5th graders. While they knew more about bats than the 3rd graders had, they were still fascinated by our work and our demonstrations. As we were leaving on the last day, we ran into a teacher at the school who had a son in our workshop. He told us how his son had come home the night before and told the family what he had learned about bats that day. When we walked out of the school, the kids on the playground ran up to us and yelled to their friends, "It's the Bat Team!" Even the kids who hadn't been in our workshops knew who we were! Our reputation had spread quickly. The kids who ran up to us began to recite some bat facts to their friends who had not been in the workshop, and they eagerly asked us more questions about our work. We had obviously made an impact!

Teaching bat workshops in a Texas elementary school was a true "service-learning" experience. Not only did the students learn some fun science, I also learned about the eagerness of kids to acquire new knowledge and pass it on to their friends. Our goal was to help dispel common misconceptions about bats in a fun, engaging way. After hearing the kids telling their friends and family about what they learned, I think it is safe to say, "Mission accomplished!"



Students use their "bat hands" to answer questions during the presentation.

~ Kristen Lear