

From Amy Purcell Vorenberg
Head of School

City Country Classroom

A few days ago, I was asked to drive an alumnus home from an evening gathering. He hopped into the back seat of my car and immediately, with great consternation, asked, "Is it true that TPS is not going to Shelly Ridge anymore?" His question surprised me, but it shouldn't have. I realized it was time to share important information about Shelly Ridge not only with this one concerned alumnus but with the TPS community at large.

But first, some history. We are a school that has found opportunity for learning in our "country classroom" since our founding in 1972. The country classroom has been an essential component of the TPS educational program since the school's inception. As Peter Berman, one of the school's founders, explained to me, a country classroom was secured at Sycamore Farm in Ambler even before classroom space was rented at Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia.

In the late 1980's, Sycamore Farm was sold, and TPS began to look for a new site for our country classroom program. A committee of trustees, parents, and faculty members conducted an extensive search, and in 1988, Shelly Ridge Nature Center, owned by the Girl Scouts of Southeastern Pennsylvania, became the location for our outdoor curriculum. For the past two decades, TPS students have enjoyed going out to Shelly Ridge once weekly during the fall and spring.

I first visited Shelly Ridge while undergoing the interview process for the position of Head of School. That morning, Susan Bodley, Judith Parker, and I walked the then-empty paths of the beautiful property. We came across two deer, who were startled by our presence and gracefully bounded off into the thickness of the brush. In that moment, I experienced the magic of Shelly Ridge and understood firsthand the wonder that TPS students experience as they move through Shelly Ridge's landscape and happen upon creatures in natural settings.

Last year, the Girl Scouts of Southeastern Pennsylvania underwent significant reorganization. Three separate councils have merged into one, now called the Girl Scouts of Eastern Pennsylvania, with a new executive director and new staffing across the larger organization. Headquartered at Shelly Ridge, the Girl Scouts leadership looks forward to serving more than 60,000 girls and expects the site to become increasingly central to its planning and activities.

We first learned of these changes last summer, when we sought to renew our Shelly Ridge rental agreement. In addition to raising the rent significantly, the Girl Scouts advised us that there might be times during the school year when scouting activities would curtail access to the site or impact programming in other ways.

We renewed the Shelly Ridge lease for the 2007-08 school year and, soon thereafter, assembled the Country Classroom Committee, made up of board members, parents, and faculty, to explore alternate sites in the region, including some areas of Fairmount Park, and to reassess continued use of Shelly Ridge. Concurrently, this process has led us to reexamine our curricular goals for the country classroom program and to explore a variety of opportunities for our students to engage with the natural world in new and exciting ways.

I return to our alumnus's question, "Is it true that TPS is not going to Shelly Ridge anymore?" We *are* going to Shelly Ridge next year and probably for years to come. Our contract to use the Shelly Ridge property extends through June 2009, with an option to renew annually. Through the ongoing work of the Country Classroom Committee, we will be prepared to respond to any changes in our relationship with the Girl Scouts of Eastern Pennsylvania and, if necessary, to identify an alternate site that will meet our curricular goals.

The three C's – City Country Classroom – are just as important at The Philadelphia School today as they were thirty-five years ago, when Sycamore Farm became our first country classroom. We moved from Sycamore Farm to Shelly Ridge, and perhaps, one day we will move again. The site may change, but rest assured that we will not lose this essential component of our program. It is paramount to achieving our mission.