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Alexa Salinas, 9, a third-grader at Central Elementary School, shakes the rocks and dirt out of her shoes as she gets ready to pack up after she and her classmates slept in tents last week as part of a camp-out at Stelzer County Park. *Howard Lipin / U-T*

# Camp-out for students an inroad to outdoors

Nonprofit aims to expose more children to nature

**By Michele Clock**  
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**T**here was some trepidation among the third-graders at City Heights' Central Elementary School.

After all, few had been on a camp-out before.

What if they encountered a snake? What if nighttime creatures tried to crawl into their tents? What would it be like to sleep away from home for a night?

But as the adventure neared an end last week at Louis Stelzer County Park in Lakeside, 8-year-old Jonathan Gonzalez didn't want to go.

"I wish we could stay here for 500

days, like one year and a half," he said.

Jonathan and more than 100 other third-graders from the San Diego school learned exactly what it's like to bunk in a sleeping bag in the wild, make s'mores and sing campfire songs, courtesy of an East County nonprofit that works to expose children to nature.

The Jarrett Meeker Foundation, founded by Judy and Keith Meeker in memory of their son, covered the costs of the two-night trip, along with donations from companies. Half the third-grade class stayed the first night, and the other half stayed the second night, with the goal of giving students an authentic camping experience, Judy Meeker said.

Principal Cindy Marten, who served as a chaperon on the trip, said most of her students come from working families living below the poverty line. Crime and limited recreation opportunities mean

some students don't get a lot of time to play outside. Many students are learning English.

Marten said the lessons the students learned on the camping trip about the Kumeyaay Indians, native plants, animals and reptiles, astronomy and hiking, just for starters, will change the students' lives. All of the lessons were designed by teachers incorporating California state curriculum standards.

"You do not get this from a textbook. You do not get this from a website," Marten said. "You learn from experience."

During a tree-planting exercise the last day of the camp-out, Kenya Alvarado, 9, confessed she had been terrified by the thought of seeing snakes and the possibility of being bitten.

"But you have to face your fears no matter what," Kenya said.