



A Good Sport

TEXAS COACH LEON MCNEIL
INSPIRES YOUTH WITH
OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

Story by **Lydia Saldaña**
Courtesy of **Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation**



LEON MCNEIL has a passion for quail hunting. He spends every single weekend during quail season in the field. He has a sterling reputation as a South Texas hunting guide and is busy with clients from the first day of quail season to the last. But that's not all he does. For his "day job," he is a full-time middle school coach in San Antonio. And when he's not doing either of those two things, he's busy running a successful nonprofit called City Kids Adventures, which mentors inner city kids through outdoor experiences. As he puts it, when you love what you do, it's not work.

Leon McNeil's passion for the outdoors and especially for passing it on to the next generation made him an obvious choice as an ambassador for Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation's "We Will Not Be Tamed" campaign. Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation launched the public awareness campaign earlier this year to encourage all Texans to get involved in conserving the wild things and wild places of our state. We Will Not Be Tamed calls us to appreciate the wildness of Texas, the vastness of our Texas spirit and why we should be inspired to conserve it. Leon McNeil personifies that message every single day.

Anyone who spends any time with Leon McNeil can only marvel at his energy. During quail season from November through February, he's not only shepherding bird dogs and clients on quail hunts all over South Texas on weekends and school holidays, but he's also teaching and coaching every school day. There's before and after school practices to be scheduled, along with football games. And his 26 trained bird dogs require daily care and exercise. When he is asked when he sleeps, he simply laughs.

From March through October, City Kids Adventures kicks into high gear. The San Antonio nonprofit has been mentoring kids through outdoor adventures for more than 20 years. Thanks to the support of many sponsors and landowners, hundreds of kids have been introduced to camping, fishing, kayaking and hunting across Texas and beyond. Leon McNeil, his wife Leticia, and his son Lee Charles are the heart and soul of the program and spend virtually the entire summer and just about every weekend taking kids on a variety of outdoor adventures.

In 2000, a summer traveling program was introduced, combining outdoor experiences with field trips to college campuses. In recent years, McNeil's kids have travelled to Alaska, New York City, Washington DC, the Grand Canyon, Key West, Yellowstone, Niagara Falls and have visited colleges including Yale, Harvard, the University of North Carolina, the University of Texas and Duke. The students who get involved with City Kids Adventures must earn their way by keeping their grades up and doing service work. The program's motto is "Hard work has many rewards," and there is no better example of that motto than Leon McNeil. His back story is just as remarkable as the life he is living now. He grew up in an inner-city neighborhood in San Antonio. His home life was troubled, and when he was in high school, his fractured family disintegrated. One of his high school coaches literally took him in, feeding him, clothing him and teaching him the value of hard work. He was a talented athlete, and he graduated from high school with an Abilene Christian University football scholarship in hand.

Plucked from a big-city urban setting and deposited into the relatively rural environs of Abilene Christian University (ACU), at first he was a fish out of water. A true city kid, McNeil had never been exposed to any outdoor experiences. A camping trip with his teammates changed that overnight, and it turned out to be a life-changing experience that set the course for his future.

The recruiter who convinced him to come to ACU introduced him to fishing. Another ACU employee learned of his interest and took him on fishing trips and introduced him to hunting and bird dogs. He told McNeil that when he graduated, he would give him a dog. True to his word, he gifted him with a puppy when Leon earned his degree in 1992.

Fresh out of college with a teaching degree and a new English Pointer puppy, McNeil connected with a well-known dog trainer in Hondo. McNeil told him he would work for free if he could learn how to train his dog. That arrangement grew into a part-time position, and Leon worked there on nights and weekends for a dozen years after that. He learned more about training dogs and took clients on quail hunts, an experience that paved the way for his own quail hunting guide business.

McNeil also started his education career in 1992. His first teaching job was at Cooper Middle School in San Antonio. There he met a fellow teacher named Leticia Martinez who was as passionate about the outdoors as he was. The two of them came up with the idea of sharing outdoor adventures with their students to motivate them to succeed, which evolved into the program that is now City Kids Adventures. Along the way the two married, and Lee Charles came along a few years later. Now all the McNeils are involved in what is truly a family enterprise.



CITY KIDS ADVENTURES participants have enjoyed just about every kind of outdoor experience imaginable. Earlier this year, a small group of high school kids took part in a South Texas feral hog hunt that was a high-adrenaline adventure for all involved. Pajarita Ranch owner Frates Seeligson, dog trainer Bubba Allen, and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department wildlife biologist Jamie Killian were along for the ride.

"We've never done this sort of hunt before, but I knew these kids were ready for it," said McNeil. "They've all been in our program since the sixth grade. There's a little more maturity involved in a hunt like this, and we really wanted to be sure everyone would be safe. We knew these kids could handle it, and they did really well."

Hunting feral hogs with dogs is not for the timid. The highly trained dogs were fitted with GPS collars and released from kennels on an ATV to catch the scent of the hogs. The dog handler tracked them with a Garmin unit, and once the hogs were spotted, the chase was on. The take weapon was a knife, and once the catch dog pinned the animal down, it was quickly dispatched.

"These kids were mature and poised and showed no trepidation," said Seeligson. "They knew what they were supposed to do. They really handled themselves well."



Seeligson is a natural born teacher and showed the kids some of the treasures on the ranch after the hunt was over. He pointed out agarita berries and dewberries, and they tasted them on the spot. They also spotted a painted bunting, which delighted the group with its bright colors and distinctive song.

"'Nature Deficit Disorder' is a real thing," said Seeligson. "I've read that the average kid in America spends four to six minutes outdoors each day. That's about how long it takes you to get out of your parked car and into a grocery store. We need to change that narrative."

Each hog that was killed was field dressed on the spot, with the kids pitching in to help. It was a hands-on wildlife biology lesson in a riveting outdoor classroom. As one of the them commented, "We don't learn this in school, that's for sure!"

For 16-year old Janai Adams, it was quite an experience. She has been involved with the program since eighth grade and says she has enjoyed the hunting adventures the best.

"I've hunted deer before, but this was way different," she said. "It's up close and personal and it makes you respect the animal and what it takes to bring one down. It wasn't easy."

Adams said she also appreciates being part of the process of bringing food home to her family.

"Most people go to a grocery store and there are all those nice pretty packages of meat," she continued. "Participating in something like this makes you appreciate the animal you are eating, and what goes in to putting food on the table. We all end up taking meat home to our families, and that's a good feeling."

For Leon McNeil, what the kids experienced on this hunt is what City Kids Adventures is all about.

"The kids we serve come from a world surrounded by asphalt and concrete," he said. "Experiencing the outdoors gives them the opportunity to understand that there is another world out there. We bring them out here, and they get to see the beauty of nature and how they fit in. It's not just about the hunt, it's about the experience."

For Seeligson, it's also about helping the next generation understand the value of open land on ranches across Texas.

"There has to be an appreciation for open spaces, and that's hard for people who live in a city to understand," he said. "The cities are where populations are. But all the open space is where our water is being filtered and where the wildlife lives. It is vital for kids to understand this. So we can't close the gates, we need to open them. That's the future voter. But it's also the future stewards. And we need to be sure the next generation understands how valuable these open spaces are to the ecosystem that supports all of us."

Leon McNeil is helping to spread that message with the kids he works with, the hunters he spends time with during quail season, and through TPWF's We Will Not Be Tamed initiative.

"There's no place on this earth quite like Texas," said McNeil. "TPWF's We Will Not Be Tamed campaign honors the land and wildlife of our state and brings awareness to it. The conservation message is one we all need to take to heart. TPWF is also helping underserved demographics enjoy the resources Texas has to offer. That's something we can all support." ♻️



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