

# KIDS for the BAY's Mandi Billinge

Interviewed by Bay Nature Magazine



## On touching a sea squirt, and other adventures with nature

*Interview by Beth Slatkin — published February 22, 2012*

Inspired by a teaching stint with inner-city kids 20 years ago, English-born teacher Mandi Billinge founded an organization that gives thousands of Bay Area children their first hands-on experience with nature. Her nonprofit KIDS for the BAY recently received the Conservation Award for Environmental Education from the John Muir Association.

**BN: Where did you grow up? When did you move to the Bay Area, and what convinced you to stay?**

**MB:** I am originally from County Durham in the North East of England, where the movie and musical *Billy Elliott* is set! I was a fourth-grade teacher in a school in inner-city London before moving to the Bay Area in 1992. For two summers I worked at Camp Mendocino, in a redwood forest with children from the San Francisco Boys and Girls Club. I had a wonderful experience living with and teaching children, who were mostly from "the projects" and spending time outdoors for the first time in their lives, about the wonders of nature. I was inspired to move to the Bay Area to continue to work with urban children and to create my own environmental education organization for them and their teachers.

**BN: And that was KIDS for the BAY (KftB)?**

**MB:** Yes. When I first moved here I wanted to bring the same kinds of exciting, hands-on environmental science projects into elementary schools that I used to teach in my school in England. Having been a classroom teacher myself, I knew the type of support that teachers need to bring hands-on science into the classroom and to take a class of excited students into the outdoors. Most elementary-school teachers don't have a science background, so KIDS for the BAY is aimed at helping them teach hands-on science in the classroom and in the outdoors.

**BN: How many teachers and students does KftB serve each year?**

**MB:** KftB partners with around 150 teachers and 4,000 K-5th grade students each year. This coming fall we'll celebrate our 20th anniversary and achieve our goal of placing 60,000 Inspired Environmentalists in KftB programs! We have a school-wide impact because we partner with grade-level teams of teachers, parents and the school principal. We also provide a unique opportunity for teachers to learn alongside their students. Teachers get academic credit units, an equipment kit, and our curriculum guides so that they can continue teaching our programs year after year. The goal is for our partner schools to integrate our programs into their school-wide curriculum and culture.

**BN: We've all heard about "Last Child in the Woods." Are the children you serve "nature-deprived"? How does KftB address this issue?**

**MB:** Most children today are "nature deprived." KftB mostly partners with low-income, urban schools and there is a lot of crime and concrete in these neighborhoods that keeps children indoors. But in all types of neighborhoods today, most children are inside with computers, video games, and TV and spending a decreasing amount of time outside. Many of the students we work with in KIDS for the BAY have never touched the water of a creek, held a crab or visited a beach. KftB takes children who would not otherwise have this opportunity on field trips to a local creek, to San Francisco Bay, and to the Pacific Ocean. KftB students get to "meet the creek," touch the water, catch mayfly nymphs in nets, and observe them in field microscopes. They get to hold a crab, touch a sea squirt, dig in the sand, see a purple ochre sea star. For most of our students this is their first time connecting with nature in a natural habitat.

**BN: What else do you teach?**

**MB:** We also teach how everything within the watershed is interconnected, from urban streets to storm drains, which lead to the local creek, the bay and the ocean. We teach how pollution affects all the organisms in a food web, including people, especially people who fish from the bay and eat the food they catch. One of the most important things we teach is that everyone has the right to live in a clean and healthy environment and we empower our students to take action. KftB Environmentalists help the environment every day by conserving water, practicing the Four Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle and rot), cleaning up their school campuses, and keeping the storm drains around their schools and homes clean. These are our future environmental leaders!