**Personal Essay - Emily DesMeules**

I grew up in Vermont with parents who were athletic, outdoor-oriented and supportive of my interests in these activities. I have always been drawn to hiking and the outdoors, and recently I took a job where I get to hike professionally! I currently work in the summers for the US Forest Service where I am paid to hike around in the mountains, and it is wonderful, even if it doesn’t quite pay the bills. An interest in hiking and mountaineering has always been present (as demonstrated by my collection of books on high-mountain ascents and expeditions which I have been compiling for years) but in a roundabout way my time firefighting led me to this adventure I wish to undertake. But to begin at the beginning…..

I played ice hockey in college and have always been a very team-oriented individual. I typically define myself by the team or organization I am a part of at the time, and I greatly value those bonds created in a high-pressure group dynamic. After I graduated from college, I really missed the camaraderie and the physical challenge of team athletics. I was working a desk job at [dealer.com](http://dealer.com), feeling quite unfulfilled and wondering what was next for me. I would spend my downtime at work reading about people who’s jobs seemed more exciting than mine; organizers of ultra-marathons in the Moroccan desert, people working in Antarctica, members of the military, and wildland firefighters.

The military I dismissed as too much commitment but I sent out a barrage of applications to the rest of these positions, and a wildland firefighting crew was the first contact me. I had never been out West, had never seen a wildfire and knew nothing about it aside from the articles I had read, so naturally I accepted the first position that came through. Four months later I packed my bags and drove cross-country to Idaho to start my new job.

I have spent the past two summers working the the US Forest Service as a wildland firefighter. My most recent season, which ended two days ago, was spent on a heli-rappel crew, which is easily the coolest thing I have done in my life and although I have some big ideas for the future, this job is going to be difficult to top. We travel the West, moving from fire to fire from April through September, living in the woods for weeks at a time with only the bare essentials. Anything that we bring with us, we have to be willing to hike with for miles, which makes us all quite spartan when packing our gear.

While we work on fires of all sizes in all manner of country, we specialize in lightning strike fires in inaccessible terrain; the idea being that an aerially delivered resource (heli-rappellers or smokejumpers) can access the fire more quickly than ground resources, which might take hours to drive and hike into the fire at which point the fire may have spread considerably.

To access a fire, we gear up and fly out to the location of the smoke, size up the fire from the air and then rappel out of the helicopter in pairs, on 250ft ropes. All our firefighting gear is contained in “war boxes” (chainsaw, Pulaski, saw fuel, medical kit, food and water for 36 hours, a tarp and a sleeping bag) which are let down to us from the helicopter after we land. Any additional gear, food or water that we require can be slung in my helicopter at a later time. We then work to put out the fire for as long as it takes, living in the woods until we are finished. A typical rappel fire is staffed by 2 to 8 rappellers.

Once the fire is out, generally taking from 2 to 5 days, we pack out our gear to the nearest road, oftentimes several miles over steep terrain. Given all the firefighting and personal gear that we carry, along with our rappel equipment, each pack-out bag weighs between 110 and 125 pounds, depending on how much of the food and fuel we have used. I had planned for last season to be my last year of firefighting to focus solely on classes, but firefighting has everything I had been missing after I stopped playing hockey and now I find it difficult to tear myself away. The camaraderie, the physical challenge and the intensity of the work are addicting, so I plan to spend another year or two of summers in Idaho, covered in dirt and soot, as the closest thing to a professional athlete that I will ever be.

Prior to the firefighting I had taken a wilderness first responder course for my own personal knowledge since I enjoyed being out in the mountains so much and I thought that would be wise. When I started applying to the fire jobs I decided to go back and get my wilderness EMT, partly because I had enjoyed the WFR so much and partly because I thought it would look good on my resume since I had no qualifications whatsoever for the jobs to which I was applying. I loved the WEMT, and have since gone back to get my Advanced EMT, which involved giving IVs, administering medications and using advanced airways, among other skills. This AEMT required 100 hours of clinical time, which I spent working on an ambulance and in an emergency room, both of which I loved. These courses and this exposure to emergency medicine, coupled with my work as a fireline EMT during the fire season has propelled me to enroll in a post-bac premedical program at UVM with the hope of eventually attending medical school and becoming a doctor that specializes in backcountry and wilderness medicine, or other applications of medicine in non-traditional settings (Antarctica, Doctors without Borders, search and rescue, etc)

Now, to bring this all back around to the adventure which I am hoping you can fund:

I have the opportunity this winter to go on a three week mountaineering course in Ecuador. The course teaches all the basics of mountaineering; crevasse rescue, glacier travel, proper ice axe and crampon technique, information on high altitude medical issues, how to pack and plan for high-mountain expeditions, etc. The trip also combines a cultural aspect, and attempts at 17,000, 18,000 and 20,000 foot mountains.

Because I work all summer for the Forest Service, my only opportunity to take a course like this is during the winter. All the mountaineering courses in the US take place in the summer, and I haven’t been able to find one that is as comprehensive as the Ecuador trip anyways. Unfortunately, wildland firefighting pays more in experience and adventure than it does in cash, and with my student schedule this winter I have limited opportunity to supplement the money I have saved up from the summer. This is where I am hoping you guys can help me out. In addition to the cost of the course, I am responsible for airfare and medical/travel insurance, and there are some items of mountaineering gear that I will need that I don’t yet own. Much of the gear can be bought secondhand or rented but even minimizing gear costs the program is out of my price range for this winter without some financial assistance.

This mountaineering trip would serve two purposes: the first being the sheer challenge and adventure and the chance to imitate mountaineering heroes like Jimmy Chinn, Conrad Anker and John Krakauer; the second would be to gain experience at altitude. One of my dreams is to work as the physician at Everest Base Camp for a season (or more) or to get on with expeditions in a medical capacity. This trip would provide me with the basis to understand the toll altitude takes on the body, and give me the tools to progress in mountaineering to a point where I can combine my future medical expertise with mountaineering experience to provide high-quality medical care to intrepid adventurers in the future.