

It's 11:15 on a September morning in Maine and autumn leaves are rustling in the air. Albert and I walk through the woods on a beautiful Tuesday morning, enjoying the crisp air. Albert is twelve years old and is in the sixth grade. His main passion at school is reading and he seems to spend hours every day with his head buried in the latest tween-book series. He has been a student in my class for the past year, and our walks have become a ritual, despite various obstacles. Albert is unlike many twelve year olds - he has a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder and a slew of medical problems. He has poor muscle development and his fine motor skills are weak. Moreover, he deals with intense dietary restrictions that would be hard for anyone to handle, let alone a child of twelve. Finally, Albert is overweight, contributing to terrible posture and making it difficult for him to develop muscle where he needs to. At Albert's pace, we walk perhaps a quarter of a mile in his twenty minutes of recess, which affords us time to take a moment for some of his favorite things. He loves to stop and spot frogs in the creek, to examine the new mushrooms that, as Albert taught me, begin to grow after the first frost, or to listen quietly for the elusive deer.

I work at a school that is a mental health collaborative servicing kids, like Albert, who qualify for special education due to emotional, behavioral or psychological disabilities. I am a BHP/Ed-Tech III, which means I'm an assistant teacher and am BHP (behavioral health professional) certified. At The Collaborative School we often say: "We give the kids what they need." Because of my own passion for the outdoors, I am fortunate enough to be able to share the therapeutic medicine of nature with kids like Albert. Children with ASD often times have a lot of trouble with competitive play, making organized sports or even simple childhood games extremely difficult. Albert sometimes gets out of breath on our walks, or complains about the heat or cold, but his curiosity is constant. Often we'll hear a rustle in the woods. "SHHH! Mr. Bridger!", he'll squeal with a sharp hand gesture. Together we peer quietly into the deep green and brown, hoping to see some more magic in the woods.

I was drawn to this work because I love kids and I didn't want to spend my days in an office. When I graduated from the University of Vermont in 2012 with a degree in Film and Television Studies, I had no idea I'd end up here. Over the past year and a half I have grown to absolutely love working with kids and teaching; especially the alternative styles of teaching we get to practice at the Collaborative School. I hope to continue working with this population of youngsters and more. My dream is to be able to share the therapy of the wilderness with those who need it most.

I've loved the outdoors since I was a child, taking camping and canoe trips throughout Maine with my family. I fell in love with the mountains when I moved to Burlington for college. I spent as much free time as possible skiing and hiking. On the slopes and the hiking trails of the Green Mountains I learned how empowering just being in the outdoors can be. The summer after I graduated I planned a thru-hike of the Long Trail with three of my best friends. I learned how amazing it is to live day in and day out in the backcountry. One year ago, long before I ever dreamed of doing a NOLS course, I began planning a solo thru-hike of the John Muir Trail in the High Sierra mountains of California and in August of this year I achieved that goal - a 1220 miles, including a summit of Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the continental United States.

My goal now is to obtain the skills necessary to lead and instruct newcomers in the wild. To care for oneself in the outdoors is an incredible accomplishment but the skills needed to competently care for yourself and others are immense, I need to learn how to plan and prepare for a specific route, how to

ration food and to fairly distribute weight throughout a group, how to assess safety and danger, as well as the various strengths and weaknesses of individuals. The National Outdoor Leadership School specializes in teaching these exact skills to people like myself. My goal is to travel to Chilean Patagonia where I will take a 40 day NOLS Mountaineering course, preparing myself for a career in outdoor education.

It's been thirteen months since I started saving for this trip. In September 2012, after I hiked the Long Trail, I moved back home with my parents in Maine. When I took my job at the school shortly after, I quickly realized that my pay wouldn't allow for me to move out on my own if I hoped to save anything. I took a second job doing per-diem catering work on the side. I started running outside and took a work-for-trade position at my local yoga studio and climbing gym. Last year I never imagined I could have saved enough to take a NOLS course. Now, two months before the course begins, I see it is challenging, but possible. I'm extremely fortunate to be able to live rent-free; however, for the past year I've been making monthly payments on my student loans comparable to what I paid for rent in Burlington. The cost of the course is nearly \$7,000. This, combined with several key pieces of gear and costly airfare to Chile, all stand as one last hurdle between where I am now and my goal. I am seeking this scholarship to assist me in completing this course without taking any additional loans.

Living at home again has been one unexpected challenge of the past year. I've always prided myself on being independent, so moving back in with mom and dad has (at times) done a number on my personal feeling of accomplishment. One thing I am so grateful for is to have found something I am truly passionate about through all of it, as well as to have parents who are so loving and supportive of my dreams. I know that this course will endow me with the skills and confidence I need to continue doing what I love; something that I care about and that I feel will truly help make this world a better place. The outdoors are where I discovered the most about myself. I want to give this back: to teach a young person the confidence and self-reliance that comes from hiking for seven days straight through rain, or navigating a snowy wood on tele-skis. Everyone deserves to experience the majesty of the mountains. Especially kids like Albert, who may need a little extra help and encouragement to experience what many of us take for granted. Thank you for considering me for this scholarship.

"May your trails be crooked, winding, lonesome, dangerous, leading to the most amazing view May your mountains rise into and above the clouds. May your rivers flow without end, meandering through pastoral valleys tinkling with bells, past temples and castles and poets towers into a dark primeval forest where tigers belch and monkeys howl, through miasmal and mysterious swamps and down into a desert of red rock, blue mesas, domes and pinnacles and grottos of endless stone, and down again into a deep vast ancient unknown chasm where bars of sunlight blaze on profiled cliffs, where deer walk across the white sand beaches, where storms come and go as lightning clangs upon the high crags, where something strange and more beautiful and more full of wonder than your deepest dreams waits for you -- beyond that next turning of the canyon walls."

Edward Abbey