

Elliot Diana | Personal Essay | Adventure Scholarship Recipient October 2021

As I begin this essay, I sit in my rocking chair on the front porch of my “Tabin” (tent/cabin) that I constructed in Hinesburg, Vermont. It is a 12x14 ft wall tent, built like a cabin, which kept me warm through the winter without a flaw and brings me more happiness than I could have ever asked for. I was born in Illinois, moved to Idaho at age two, Massachusetts at age 4 and Connecticut at age 5. I remember bits and pieces of all these places. Luckily my parents are people of the forest as well and chose a home in Connecticut that abuts 500 acres of Mashantucket/Pequot tribal land. In these woods, my best friend and I found ourselves and developed our outdoor skills. Growing up we were middle class, never leaving the country on vacation except for one memorable trip to Quebec. We also were not poor. My parents could take a week to go back north to the Adirondacks to canoe, or to New Hampshire to visit my grandparents. As I have grown older, I have developed a deep appreciation for the socio-economic class from which I came. Privileged to have everyday comforts, but humble enough to not take anything for granted.

My days of adventuring began with my earliest memories. Climbing trees, swimming in small rivers with my mother and sitting in the canoe, before I could paddle. My mother has always been a musician, teacher and a very capable paddler/hiker. My father began as a veterinarian, worked for the peregrine fund and then brought us to Connecticut for a brief stint with Pfizer. He is a woodworker, falconer, hunter and a dreamer, always pursuing the next opportunity to develop a new skill or experience. From my parents, I took my deep need to adventure and live outdoors.

After graduating from high school, I left for a year to work in a zoo in Asuncion, Paraguay. I made friends, had truly unbelievable experiences and perfected their unique dialect of Spanish. Upon return, I went to UVM as an engineer. I changed my course load the first day and enrolled in the Natural Resources Ecology program. During the year I led outing club rock climbing and general outdoors programs. When the winter came, I left to work as a dog sledding guide at the Wintergreen Dog Sledding Lodge in Ely, Minnesota under a man named Paul Schurke. Paul is a world-renowned arctic explorer, a father, an animal that can withstand almost any amount of cold and one of my greatest mentors of expeditioning, winter survival and storytelling I have met. During the summers I worked as an intern for the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, as a vegetable farmer for a friend in Minnesota and as an outdoor educator for the Northwoods Stewardship Center in East Charleston Vermont, under a woman named Maria Young. Maria is another one of my greatest mentors. She has led a life in the North East Kingdom and is now the executive director of the Northwoods Stewardship Center.

Until this year I was a timberframer/carpenter out of Huntington, Vermont. Woodworking has always been a part of my family and I and learning to build in both the traditional and modern ways has proven to be extremely valuable. I also dedicate a large amount of time to studying music and playing in local music groups.

After graduating early from UVM I did one more season at Wintergreen and then worked for a sugar maker back in Vermont. The next year I got a loan from the Farm Service Agency and installed 2,800 taps on his land to manage and collect sap from. This began my adventure as a sugar maker which is still in full throttle. I am currently in the process closing on a smaller sugar bush in Lincoln, Vermont, upon which I will eventually build a home and run my farm. Sugaring has

been an immense adventure. Tapping, chain sawing, finding leaks, boiling, timing sap collection and long hours of cleaning. It has proven to be rewarding, hardening and humbling. My sugaring loans, common life bills and upcoming mortgage is why I am applying to you for funding. I am going to paddle, pole and portage the Northern Forest Canoe trail this spring as soon as my last tap is pulled. The 744-mile canoe trail takes an average of 40-50 days to complete. All of Vermont is upstream. I can not take two months off work at this point of my life. It quickly becomes apparent that long term backcountry adventure is not easy to include in a working life. I have felt backcountry adventure drift away from me, but I am actively bringing it back and will keep it. This trip has been a dream for me since I worked as an intern guide for the Northern Forest Canoe Trail. It is a canoe trail that if I lay down to pass on, I will regret not having done.

The Flyin Ryan Adventure Scholarship would support some of the financial burdens of the trail. These include food, permits and upgrading gear. It would also help subsidize my farm mortgage for the month and a half that I am gone. I have money saved to cover anything that I must, but as a farmer it is never certain how much you will make in a season and after last year there is not much of a margin. As part of this trip, I am beginning to set up an advocacy trail. I hope to have a lightweight canoe donated from North Star Canoes. Before and along the trail I will have gatherings to bring attention to the NFCT and specifically the Northern Forest Explorers, which allows children from low socio-economic house holds to go on canoe trips on their local sections of the trail. I want to have people who support the mission to sign the canoe and donate money, which would all go back to scholarships for children that could not otherwise pay for a Northern Forest Explorers trip. Upon completion of the trail, I would give the signed canoe back to the NFCT office so they can auction it off for money to support their stewardship of the trail.

This world is not set up fairly. There are children that look at the rivers in their back yards and see people paddle by that will never be able to know what it is like to travel on that river unless someone else gives them the economic opportunity and initiative. This trip is not only about me, but also about the children that were not as lucky as I was growing up to be exposed to the canoe.

I ask the Flyin Ryan Foundation for 2,000 dollars to allow this adventure to materialize. For me and for others that I hope to help in the process. I have been in contact with Paul Schurke, talking about fundraising strategies and resources to help this come to fruition.

It is easy to lose our adventurous selves when we must also provide for ourselves as well. I hope you are well, whoever is reading this, and I hope that my spirit and mission ring true.