

FRHF Adventure Scholarship
Personal Essay
Jonathan Shapiro

I grew up in New England, and moved to the American Southwest in my early 20s. I fell immediately and deeply in love with the arid deserts and huge backcountry—anytime I had a few days free, I'd throw a jug of water and a tent in the truck and disappear. I'd gone camping and hiking as a kid, but this was different—the scale of the landscape and the freedom of huge tracts of remote public land changed me for good.

After a few years of this, I realized that, although my time out in the wild was transformative, I knew very little about the places I explored. I'd been so busy looking at the big picture of the landscapes that I'd never stopped to wonder about the other creatures out in the canyons. I started reading field guides and taking classes, learning about the plants, birds, and animals that shared the desert with me.

This period of my life laid the foundation for my wilderness and nature connection ethic: I was building relationship with the natural world through sustained time in wild places, coupled with deep knowledge of the landscape. I came to understand that this is a necessity for cultural and emotional wholeness—we need a reciprocal relationship with the places we live. But there was a missing piece. Despite learning the names of the other living things around me, I still felt like a tourist when I was out in the canyons.

I turned 30 and moved back to the Northeast, still carrying the flame of my time in the desert. I turned my attention to the landscape where I grew up, but the feeling of being a tourist persisted—until I found wildlife tracking. Through a friend of a friend, I heard about Dan Gardoqui, an educator in Maine who taught tracking—taught people to read the stories of animals on the land. I set aside money every month for a year to pay for his courses.

Walking through the woods with Dan was like having an interpreter at hand in a foreign country. He was able to explain things I'd always wondered about, and show me things I'd never noticed—but more importantly, he taught me how to really see what was around me, how to really *hear* bird song, and how to make connections between plants, animals, and weather on the landscape.

After a couple years of study with Dan, I knew I needed to bring what he had taught me to others. I had started college in my teens, but didn't find what I was looking for, and left after a few semesters to head out West. I hadn't thought about higher education since then, but my time with Dan made me reconsider. I enrolled in a natural history undergraduate program at a local college, hoping to get the remaining skills I needed to become a teacher and mentor myself.

Sterling College is a small, ecology and outdoor education focused school, and one of the only places left in the country where you can study natural history as a major. The program was a perfect fit for me, and I was lucky enough to meet my second nature mentor there—David Gilligan. He taught the natural history curriculum, and one of his gifts was creating an overarching framework for understanding the natural world, rather than trying to learn it as a collection of individual species. This holistic approach to landscape-scale natural history was the final piece in my relationship to the land.

The spring after I turned 38, I graduated from Sterling with an undergraduate degree in Vertebrate Natural History, and finally felt like I was ready to hang out a shingle as an adult

educator. I launched the Fox Paw School here in Northern VT, hoping to unite deep knowledge of the natural world with exploration of wild places, and connection to the land. These are the tenets of my educational philosophy, and I consider Fox Paw my small contribution towards cultural change and ecological literacy.

At Fox Paw, I run many different types of programs, but the long-term apprenticeships are my favorite—with more time together, I'm able to build deeper relationships with my students and create a wonderful container for nature connection as a path to self-improvement and building a sense of place. The folks who take these immersive courses are lifelong learners, and that's a core value of mine, so I love to support that trait in others. And the immersive courses allow me to really mentor students who want to take these skills farther, just as I was able to find mentorship when I looked for it.

After my mentor David left Sterling College, I took over teaching his natural history program, and now teach one of the only college-level wildlife tracking courses offered in the US. Teaching there has brought me full-circle at Sterling, moving from student to instructor, and allowing me to continue my relationship with a community that has had a major impact on my adult life.

My mentor Dan's method of teaching wildlife tracking comes out of a collaborative effort between white researchers and Indigenous San Bushmen in southern Africa. This lineage and way of teaching has been transformative in my life—and in the spring of 2026, I have the opportunity to go to Namibia and learn and track with some of the white South Africans, and Bushmen elders, who have worked to combine traditional knowledge with modern research methods. This trip will be both an adventure and a chance to engage in new learning, and also an amazing opportunity to bring home new skills to pass on to my students.

This trip is hosted by Tracking the Kalahari (TTK), an amazing organization of volunteer wildlife trackers. Every year, TTK organizes a group of people from around the world to come connect, track, and share meals with the San Bushmen of the Nyae Nyae region of Namibia. Since all TTK staff are volunteers, all proceeds go directly to the San Bushmen, to support a number of community projects they have decided are their cultural priorities.

The TTK trip costs \$4850 plus airfare. I know this is more than you normally award for scholarships, so I am asking for half of the tuition—\$2425. I hope to find other funding sources for the rest of the tuition, and can pay for airfare (~\$1200) myself. Thank you for considering my application, and for the wonderful work the FRHF does to support adventure, values-driven living, and self-actualization!