



VOYAGE OUT* PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: CAVING WITH JOHN PAUL TAYLOR

By the time we reached the “Crystal Crawl”, I was doing OK, but was decidedly out of my element. We were deep underground in the Fort Stanton Cave, a mile and half from the entrance to the cave, and hundreds of feet underground. I help to run a lot of rock climbing days with clients at the Mountain Center, and while I’m comfortable climbing a hundred feet up off the ground on a rope, being in a cave was an entirely different matter.

“Stay on the path,” our guide Stephen explained to us, “if you have to pee, do it in a bottle, and leave nothing behind, not even crumbs- it throws off the delicate balance of the cave’s ecosystem.”

I was in the cave with two other Mountain Center Staff and ten young men from the John Paul Taylor juvenile detention facility, outside Las Cruces. During the previous two months, we had been out doing challenge initiatives, rock climbing and rappelling and now were in Fort Stanton Cave as a final challenge.

Julio, a client from Roswell, stayed at the front of the group, and peppered Stephen with questions throughout the hike. Interestingly, Julio had had some difficulties trusting during the rock climbing that we had done earlier in the month, but while

others were challenged by the confines of the cave, he was only filled with enthusiasm and energy.

“What’s that stuff that looks like moss?”

“Where are all the bats?”

“How far underground are we?” Stephen patiently answered each question.

We had been hiking in the cave for an hour and a half before we reached the Crystal Crawl, passing through vast chambers where our lights barely lit the ceiling, climbing up over steep rock falls, and getting comfortable with the dark and the close, hushed nature of the caves.

“You all ready for the crawl?” asked Stephen.

“Yes sir!” stated Julio. Others nodded. We all got down on our hands and knees onto the soft, damp clay floor, squeezed under a low rock ceiling, and headed into the dark tunnel that was just tall enough to crawl in. We all had headlamps, and shuffled along trying not to bang our heads, following the dark silhouette of the crawler in front of us. **After a few minutes, I began to sweat and feel a bit claustrophobic; after a few more minutes I was getting just plain tired. The longer we crawled, the more I started to feel like I was crawling deeper and deeper into some tiny, airless hole.** Finally, after crawling for more than ten minutes without pause, I ducked under a low ceiling again, and was able to stand up in a small chamber. Person after person emerged from the crawl, some quiet, some elated, all of us sweaty and with dirty hands and knees. “Never again,” said Ricardo, from

Albuquerque, “you could never get me to do this again.”

“You don’t like it?” I asked him.

“Well I’ve certainly never done anything like it,” he said between breaths.

“You wouldn’t do it again then?”

“Never. Well, I would take my kids to do it, now that I know how...” Ricardo seemed sure that he was

being traumatized by the experience, but continued to talk about his kids the longer we caved, and whenever he talked about the caving, he did it with a flickering smile on his face.

Recovering from the crawl, I felt a tic of nervousness as I looked around at the small space that we were all crouched in. Next to me, Stephen chattered on about rock formations; two kids were eating fruit leather.

I remembered feeling scared early on in my rock climbing days, and the feeling I was getting in the cave was similar. I was definitely challenged to go further that day, but I went anyway, inspired by the clients, many of whom were similarly pushing themselves.

I was reminded of what we ask our clients to do every day: confront themselves, confront what they’re scared of, challenge them to grow beyond the confines of past versions of themselves.

At the end of the day, as we climbed out of the cave into bright sunlight, I felt something our clients must experience also at the end of some Mountain Center days: relief, a sense of accomplishment, and pride at having challenged myself to try something new.

- Kevin Moeller, MA



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Santa Fe Mountain Center is dedicated to promoting personal discovery and social change among youth, families, and groups through the use of creative learning experiences in wilderness, community, and cultural environments.



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SUMMER NEWSLETTER 2007

“DON’T BE AFRAID TO BE AMAZING!” - Andy Offutt Irwin



Summer Update

By Sky Gray, MS, CTRS, Executive Director

Well, our busy summer has taken hold and we are out and about in the wondrous outdoor environments where we conduct most of our programs.

This summer as we continue to employ our new curriculum, the Experiential Adventure-Based Resiliency Model, we do so in solidarity with a new wave of hope coming from the No Child Left Inside movement, codified by Richard Louv, the author of Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder. Concerned that America has become a largely sedentary and wired nation, the people involved in the No Child Left Inside movement seek to reconnect youth with the outdoors and all that it has to offer on physical, mental, scientific and spiritual levels. This is clearly a direction the work of SFMC has been supporting since our first program opened in 1979.

There is concurrently a wake-up call resounding throughout the nation and world about the urgency of taking stewardship of the earth we inhabit, and we are consequently making environmental stewardship and ethics a more explicit part of our curriculum.

On September 20, we are hosting an event at the Governor’s Mansion to celebrate our supporters, programs and the No Child Left Inside movement. Dr. Cheryl Charles, the president of the Children and Nature Network, will be our keynote speaker. She has 30 years of experience developing outdoor based/environmental curricula and is speaking to groups, corporations and state governments about the movement and the issues we are facing, e.g., childhood obesity, diabetes and alienation from the outdoors, to name a few. Invitations will be sent out to our supporters in mid-August, so keep your eye on the mail, as we are expecting to fill the event to capacity!

(Continued on Page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

Lastly, we are enjoying our newly-acquired land and facilities. As a part of our strategic plan, we will be launching a fund raising plan to assist us with building and land upgrades.

It is an exciting time for SFMC and our momentum continues to grow in leaps and bounds. Our programs are strong and our following of best practices has netted us great success in program outcomes. Stay tuned to the positive directions that SFMC is headed, as we are living our tag line of "Don't be Afraid to be Amazing!"



TAP PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: ADVENTURE ON THE RIO CHAMA

by Tony Juan Dixon & Jenn Jevertson, MS

Ask yourself this: What makes an *adventure*? Here at the SFMC, we believe that the element of adventure exists when there is an element of surprise; when an activity or experience compels our participants do something they never imagined possible. Adventure is about taking risks—not necessarily physical risks, but emotional and apparent physical risks, where participants see the natural consequences before them.

We began working with the Los Lunas Drug Court youth in the fall of 2006, providing therapeutic adventure single-day sessions and two different overnight camps. This group of self-selected youth was eager for challenge and opportunities to create positive change in their lives. We decided this group needed a BIG adventure...so this summer we took them whitewater rafting on the wilderness section of the Rio Chama.

We began this 4-day wilderness adventure with preparation at the Mountain Center, including using the Climbing Tower to focus on self-awareness, goal setting, trust, and working within a group. We taught them about appropriate equipment and prepared our gear for the next day. The most memorable event of that evening was the group collectively writing and drawing their Full Value Commitment (an agreed upon set of expectations). We debriefed our day,



discussed what we thought it would be like to be on the river, and ended the evening with a question: "What do you think your biggest challenge will be on the river tomorrow?"

The second day began with an early morning getting ready to drive to El Vado Ranch, our put-in for the 28-mile stretch of river. In the midst of all the demands of preparation, the group communicated well, and responded to all directions that were given from the guides and staff. In the van, participants wrote a challenge they

thought they might encounter on the river. It was explained to the group that if you have time to consider (even write down) challenges you may encounter, you will likely have a clearer picture of how to skillfully address that challenge when faced with a critical decision in the moment. (These challenges were reflected upon later that night around the campfire.)

The river guides at the put-in were still getting rafts prepared for the journey. In the meantime, we crossed an old cable bridge nearby. Once across the river, we had a check-in under a tree that leaned over the river. Everyone was excited. All the talk about a river trip for the past few months was real now. Before heading back, we read the clients a quote from Hemingway: "No man [or woman] can cross the same river twice. For it is not the same river, and he is not the same man". We asked the clients to walk back in silence and to think of these words.

All preparations went well, and before we knew it, we were on the river. The skies threatened above us, but we were on the river. Everyone was in a good mood, smiling, joking, playing, and enjoying what is one of the most beautiful wildernesses in New Mexico. We were truly alone: just the trees, birds, water, sun, wind, rain, stars, and the spirit of the community we had created.

And sure enough, those skies challenged us. First we were given 50 mph winds (remember that day there was a tornado just outside of Santa Fe?), then we were given a steady down-pour for almost an hour. A little after the rain finally stopped, one of the participants chuckled

in a way that sounded like there was more to it. He said, "It's funny. Look at us, we are acting like kids, and I am having the best time of my life." Even through soaking rain and wind that could blow a train at rest backwards (we had to paddle *hard* just to not be blown upstream!), this group of teenagers was conquering some major challenges, and finding complete joy in it. Nature is without a doubt a place to rejuvenate the soul.

After a restful night of sleep, we began our day with a check-in and our quote for the day, courtesy of Thoreau, "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you imagine."

One of the great memories from day two was right before we got in the rafts for the day. Squealing like children, we all took turns dipping in the river and watching the reactions of others; it was as if it were the first time in our lives we had been in water. For those of you who don't know, the Chama is cold. And by cold, we mean COLD!

Soon after we were in the rafts, there was a bend in the river, and a noise that none of us had heard. It was by far the biggest rapid that we had seen on this trip, and we were heading right for it. Words can not express the excitement, but this might help: "Yahoo!", jumping up and down, eyes wide, faces smiling, clenching fists on paddles, yelling to the other crews of what was ahead. Not only were the rapids great, the scenery was unbelievable.

We hit our camp early that day, and took a hike up Huckabee Canyon. The slot-like canyon ended in a bowl, and the canyon wall stretched 100 feet straight up in front of us. We climbed to a ledge that was almost like a being in a cave. We discussed healthy and poor decisions we had made in the past. We talked about how we

(Continued on page 3)

had made those decisions; everyone shared thoughtfully, and made connections to the emotions that had arisen with the consequences (positive or negative) of those decisions.

When we headed back to camp, the participants spread out for an hour-long solo, and wrote a self letter. They were given a list of topics to focus on, such as: "Two things you did that surprised you. Something you did for the first time and how that felt. Why being good to yourself and others made for a good time. A good memory you had. The most exciting part of the trip. Something you want to do (change) for yourself before you get this letter." Some were done within a half hour; for others, there was not enough time or paper. They addressed the letter to themselves, and we collected them to mail after the trip. Although the participants were part of cook and clean crews, we had a surprise for them: as a reward for their hard physical and mental work that day, the river guides had dinner already prepared.

That evening we had an amazing debrief; it was the epitome of why we do what we do here at SFMC. We often use metaphors to process how an adventure experience can parallel your own life. In this case, we challenged each participant to create a metaphor that paralleled their own life based on an event earlier in the day when one of the rafts got firmly stuck on a "sleeper" (a rock just under the surface). Upon impact, one of the clients flew out and the others rushed to pull him back in the boat. The clients and their guide were doing everything possible to get unstuck. The other boat of clients could only watch, unsure of how to help. Eventually our other gear raft came along and intentionally bumped the stuck raft off.

The clients thought about this experience for a few moments, and one after the other, they began sharing: "The river is life, the rock is a poor

decision, and you have to figure out how to get out of it." They were deep, meaningful metaphors, each one different from the next—some revolving around families, some around drug court. The most memorable came from the client who had fallen in, "The river is life, the rock is drug court, the boat passing by is my family watching me get in trouble, the people on my boat are the people in the program trying to help me."

This quote is a fitting end to the story of our adventure. We have only to add that this Rio Chama journey was one of the most powerful SFMC programs in recent memory, and we are sure it will long be remembered both by the participants and the SFMC staff - Jenn, Juan Tony, and Laura.



NEW FUNDING RECEIVED FROM THE SIERRA CLUB!

by Ian Sanderson

Young people today are in many ways alienated from the natural world. The Santa Fe Mountain Center has used the outdoors as a medium for personal growth and change for over 28 years and has witnessed this first hand. Providing experiential adventure-based education programs to New Mexico's most underserved populations has been extraordinarily educational in this regard, as most of the youth we work with have not been exposed to the beauty of the nearby mountains and rivers that make New Mexico an outdoor adventure mecca.

Earlier this year, the Emergence program at SFMC was awarded a grant of \$25,000 from the Sierra Club Foundation's *Building Bridges to the Outdoors* program. This is the foundation's newest initiative that is dedicated to ensuring that all young people in the country have opportunities to reconnect with the natural world through quality Outdoor and Environmental Education programs.

Through this funding, with additional support from the Chamiza Foundation, Emergence began in June 2007 working with a group of high school age students from Santo Domingo Pueblo. We have designed a dynamic and comprehensive program which includes, but is not limited to, education and skill development in the following areas: Community Building, Tracking and Wilderness Living, Traditional and Contemporary Practices in Sustainability, De-Colonization, and Youth Organizing.

It is our belief at SFMC that the students' experience from this project will allow them to recognize the patterns of their own lives and the connection to the patterns of the natural world around them, challenging them to think and act at a higher level of consciousness on a number of personal, social and environmental issues. This will in turn aid their development as our future leaders, responsible citizens and activists.

SAVE THE DATE!!

GOVERNOR'S MANSION RECEPTION September 20th, 2007 5:30-7:00 pm
Join us for a very special evening at the Governor's Mansion to:

- Honor our supporters
- Learn about "NO CHILD LEFT INSIDE" from Cheryl Charles, President of the Children and Nature Network
- Hear first-hand from SFMC participants

For more info or to RSVP:
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