adventure risk challenge
developing youth literacy and leadership

2019 WRITINGS OF SUMMER COURSE ALUMNI
Dear ARC Community,

Each year we put together a memory book to document and share the Adventure Risk Challenge experience. This year, we hope that the joy, resilience, and triumph of the youth from the summer of 2019 come through to everyone who reads this book. We had the pleasure of supporting three extraordinary groups of young people this summer who met every challenge head on and were deeply engaged in a process of discovery. During the last week of her 40-day course this summer, Rosa Sanchez wrote, “In this very moment, I feel like I can tell myself that I love myself for who I am. I feel accomplished and ready to take steps forward, better trusting myself and others, and finally letting go of some of my fears.”

In order to support more youth like Rosa throughout each year, we are excited to begin rolling out our new Community Leadership Program. It is the result of an exploration into what we do best and how we can better meet existing needs in our communities, and its design incorporates the perspectives of our alumni, parents, and community partners. The Community Leadership Program aims to support students from their transition to high school through graduation and beyond, expanding academic readiness, developing leadership skills, and exposing youth to the outdoor world.

Because of your support, we are able to use an intentional and holistic approach to invest in the life of each one of our participants. We have seen evidence of ARC’s impact in their physical, emotional and mental well-being. As you read this memory book, you will hear directly from six ARC youth about their experiences and challenges, both within and outside of their time with ARC. Thank you for your trust in us as we continue to provide opportunities for youth to dig deeper and expand their horizons.

Respectfully Yours,

Sarah Ottley
Executive Director
sarah@adventureriskchallenge.org

Share your story.
Find your best self.
Write your future.
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TEAM NAME: The Traveling Poets

BASECAMP LOCATION: UC Berkeley Sagehen Creek Field Station

COURSE LENGTH: 33 days
I am Hidden Lake,
A clear blue pool hiding among the mountains.
I get my water from the rain or the snow.
The water falls on top of the mountain
Where it’s cold, windy, and beautiful,
Moving from creek to creek.
When I lived in Yemen I moved three times searching for a better life.
I was always trying to find a safe place to live.

After 12 years of applying to come to the United States,
My family and I got our chance.
The snow has to melt and travel over rocks
Before it can reach the lake.

On our journey coming from Yemen to the United States,
We faced many risks and dangerous challenges.
We were falling snow, blown and battered by the wind.
We traveled by bus for two nights.
Yemeni and Iranian soldiers were fighting
To control the road we were on.
They were shooting at each other with bazookas and guns.
After the Yemeni soldiers controlled the road,
there were a lot of dead bodies all around us.
The Yemeni soldiers stopped us and searched the bus.
I was so scared and worried about what would happen
To me and my family.
The snow falls on trees and rocks and doesn’t know where
it’s going to land; once it falls it has no control.

Eventually, I made it to Hidden Lake, to the United States.
I am safe now but I feel pain and many emotions inside.
The wind pushes the water of Hidden Lake to make big waves.

Now, I hide my feelings and my personality
Because it is difficult to explain my journey.
Like Hidden Lake, I hold a lot of heavy rocks
At the bottom of my soul.
Only people who open their arms can reach me.
Only people who look for me can find me.
I hide myself and my feelings from others
Because I don’t want anyone to know how hard it was for me,
Or how many challenges I faced to get here.

Hidden Lake taught me that I can move around the big heavy rocks.
I want to stay hidden from people who would pollute my clear water.
I want to be more transparent so people can see how strong I am,
And see the clear beauty beneath my surface.
I don’t want to come home after spending all day at a job I hate and slump into a chair, my body hurting from a long day’s work. I don’t want the only things I look forward to in my life to be the month’s paycheck or a weekend away from work. For these reasons and more I want to educate myself. I want to reach a job where I give opportunities to others and help them reach their potential. I never want to stop learning. The hope I have now was very present six years ago when my mother inspired me and pushed me to be my best self. But since she left until very recently, I felt a deep hole in my throat. Her faith in me isn’t as easy to feel as it was in the past. Since hope was so absent, education after high school seemed to be an unreachable destination that I had to forget. Affording college seemed absurd and I felt it was better to focus on something else. Then I was offered a chance to interview a local community member, Craig. I wasn’t nervous and didn’t expect to take much away other than awkward silences. But when I opened up a little bit, I realized I had someone I could learn a lot from, someone who balanced truth and hope perfectly. From Craig, I learned that there should always be hope and that the limitations in my life are actually opportunities that I can allow to either stop me or push me forward.

Before Adventure Risk Challenge I was only proud of my origins. I was proud to know that my skin was the same shade as the Aztecs who stood above Tenochtitlan with Penachos and bravely ruled Mexico, I was proud of saying, “Born in Tlalnepantla.” During ARC I realized that I am in complete control of who I want to become. Before ARC I was not proud of the person I was growing up to be. I felt myself molding into my pessimistic father and shaping up to be the bad guy in my own story. I found myself thinking words he would say and letting people like him drain all the hope out of me. I was disappointed in myself for not working on changing this attitude. I heard people criticizing me and didn’t care at all; I gave them no value and therefore completely disregarded their opinions and didn’t offense to anything. The first days at ARC I knew that I came off as a mean, rude, and hopeless kid and didn’t realize how much I didn’t want that. At ARC I love all of the friends I’ve made, and for the first time, I want all of them to love a new me.

Hope and positivity started to appear when I realized that the world has many people in it like the other students I’ve met at ARC. I felt that for my teammates to be so kind and respectful after such unfair things had happened to them they deserved more than a smile or knuckle bump. They deserved positivity and love from everyone. I felt that I could relate to them after hearing more about their lives. I gave them the respect I don’t have towards most of the Tahoe kids I go to school with. I felt that positivity is something I should try to give off more often to any new face I come across. When I had the pleasure to speak with my interviewee, a wave of hope that felt so right washed over me. We discussed my future and for the first time I wasn’t nervous, scared, or disappointed. I felt that because I wanted it, college could absolutely happen. My interviewee convinced me I would be walking through campus with a backpack on, pursuing a career I’m interested in, but he didn’t leave out the truth. Getting into college is hard and college itself will be hard too. “There is no white knight coming,” Craig repeated these words and forced me to let go of any fears about how hard things will be. I will get myself through the challenges that are to come; I will be the knight that stabs through every wall to save myself and keep growing.

This new optimistic me won’t be as hesitant during classes because I’m now convinced all the academic work will actually pay off. I will take advantage of opportunities that will help me get to college because I know it will be vital to whether I walk through campus in the future or not. I believe that in three years I will be at a college working towards a marine engineering career that I will love.

Now I feel that when I head home it’ll be easier for my family and other people to love me unconditionally. I won’t only be wanted at certain times because of my negativity pushing others down. Instead, I will lift up everyone with this hope I have gained during ARC. My hope will glorify everywhere I am: my job, my car, my home, in a way that they haven’t been in years. My past self couldn’t believe the idea that at such a low income I would ever be in college or that there are people who believed actually deserved my respect or should experience an ounce of my love. Now I want everyone to know that I can talk and make them smile. I will show respect to get it. I plan on going home and filling that apartment with this confidence I now have. My sister and brother will have no doubt about going to college and will be inspired by me to not give up.

This newfound knowledge of my potential has shown me I won’t have to slump on any chair after a shift I hate. I’m not fixed on the idea that my future is without opportunity, even with the people in my life who refuse to say they’re proud or that they believe in me. I believe in myself. After an hour-long conversation with a stranger, I vanquished all the doubts I had accepted for six years. I believe this newfound hope will motivate me to always stay hungry, to be my own white knight, and to never let my limitations be my conclusions.
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BASECAMP LOCATION:
UC Merced Sequoia Field Station

COURSE LENGTH:
26 days
I’m the second oldest of six children,  
A mature yarrow plant,  
My stalk sinewy and strong,  
Willing to take all the weight off of my oldest brother’s shoulders,  
Who refuses to take care of and love our younger siblings.  
I lift my family’s flowers high,  
Especially my four younger brothers.  
I’m the only girl,  
Still a child, I have to take initiative with house responsibilities,  
While my parents wake up earlier than the sun  
To work in the fields  
And come back at sunset with every bone aching,  
To put food on our plate and a roof over our heads.  
The clink of plates as I set the table,  
Dragging my feet to the sink to wash the dishes,  
Soapy water all over my shirt and shoes.

I have the strength to support my family  
But I am a solitary yarrow  
Wishing to be in a colony of flowers  
To play  
Or to spend more time as a family.  
“Sorry for not being there,”  
My mom and dad always apologize at the dinner table.

My roots stretch through the gritty,  
Loose sand of fear.  
I worry about not protecting my family  
Or disappointing my parents  
If something happened.  
At 13 years old  
I felt overwhelmed,  
Knowing so little about caring for others  
Yet carrying such big responsibilities.  
Hot tears would prickle my eyes  
When I burnt the tortillas or found out  
It was sugar, not salt, that I added to the eggs.

Being a yarrow, my stems became stronger as I grew  
And supported all the flowers in my family.  
As my brothers grow,  
They become their own yarrow plants.  
They are learning to become more independent.  
I wake up being told to go back to sleep by brother Pascual,  
14 years old,  
Making the burritos with beans, rice and ground beef  
In the microwave.  
As I sit down in the living room with my plate of burritos,  
Adding Tapatio,  
Watching my brothers make their own bed without any help,  
Washing their own clothes without being told,  
I realize that now I am able to support my own blossoms.

I want to have more time to myself  
To plan out my future,  
Deciding the college of my choice,  
Being able to have a teenage life  
By going out and spending time with my friends,  
Just as a yarrow grows alongside other kinds of flowers.  
I hope to read books  
Or focus on writing  
Without having to worry  
About who is picking up my brothers from school  
Or who is going to take care of them.

Even though  
I want to leave home knowing my brothers are independent  
And able to take care of one another,  
I will miss the role I played for my brothers.  
I’ve become a healing tea  
Steeped in a warm mug,  
Offering them a sip  
When they need someone to talk to.  
I’m my own cup of tea,  
Who understands their feelings.  
I’m an example of support  
And strength.

wendi millan
From The Dinner Table
Every Sunday morning, the smell of pancakes woke us up.  
I was just a spiral top sequoia, my brother and sister next to me,  
Just babies beginning to sprout,  
Gathering as many nutrients as possible  
So they could grow as tall as me.

It was tradition to rent a movie on Sundays.  
My parents would re-stock the fridge and soon after, take a nap.  
I would go to my room and pull out a green bin from my closet,  
Filled with toys I cherished.  
For dinner, my mom drizzled lemon and salt onto the lettuce and tomato  
While I poured ketchup onto the crispy fried fish.  
Oh how much snow we had absorbed before the wildfire.  
The conditions were right.  
The soil not too wet and not too dry.  
The elevation was perfect,  
Being able to see the sunset  
Through the windows of our third story apartment.  
Those were the days of joy and bliss

In the distance there was smoke and the air began to taste dense.  
The sip of alcohol and dash of loud Spanish music centered themselves in the living room.  
Whether it was a party or just my family,  
These were the elements of a chaotic Saturday night.  
Something about adults and alcohol:  
The perfect mix for wildfires of emotions.  
First it would start off like a warm breeze in the air,  
Nice and gentle.  
People dancing and enjoying themselves.  
The music would slowly die down and the adults would sit  
Sip  
And talk.  
They would begin to speak from the heart.  
There were always so many possibilities.  
Yet the ending was always the same. Wildfires.

The fire was visible, tops of trees engulfed in flames.  
The crackling of fire burning wood  
And moving through the forest grew louder and hotter.  
I would be in my room, but I would not lay on my bed.  
I sat on the carpet with my ear against the door  
Just listening to the sound  
Of loud poisoned words.

The fire was here.  
The trees and plants around me burned to the ground  
As I stood and watched.  
My mom left us but I would not cry.  
The sapling sequoias next to me,
Dani Bainsmith
Gustavo Garcia
Jesus Alejandre
Kristen Sawyer

INSTRUCTORS
Anayeli Sanchez
Ben George
Blanca Lopez
Bosco Wei
Evelyn Arroyo
Jocelyn Santiago
Neftali Lopez
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PARTICIPANTS
TEAM NAME: Diversity Homiez

BASECAMP LOCATION: UC Merced Yosemite Field Station & Wawona Elementary School

COURSE LENGTH: 40 days
I am Mother Earth.
I’m seen in beautiful ways, but
I’m also seen as a monster.
I give you air
Yet I abolish cities with my wrath.
I’m learning to forgive
But not forget.

The first time I found my rage
Was when someone I loved with all my
Heart
Soul
and Spirit
Told me he would wait for me.
Then, he left.
Where is he?
What did I do wrong?
Winter built up inside of me.
One year passed.
He came back.
At first, I didn’t recognize him.
The frost was in my core.
I was so cold, I couldn’t even talk to him.
My throat got tighter and tighter
Like the feeling when you want to cry
But it’s stuck.

As I got older,
I started getting colder.
More people threw trash in my waters.
I never used my strong hurricane voice.
Peers told me that style of clothes you wear
Isn’t “Ladylike.”
They told me I couldn’t pass my AP class
Because it’s too hard.
People underestimate me.

Because I would clean a lot
Someone I respect once told me,
“You’re ready to be a maid.”
I laughed it out.
It was a joke to her but in me,
The clouds swelled up,
Ready to burst into a storm.
The Thunder, a catastrophe within
Broke away little pieces of me.
My tornado was breaking my trees.
My earthquake was shaking every feeling
Inside of me.
But still, I disguised my ocean in calmness.
Hiding the monsters that live beneath.

To this day, many see me and think
I’m calm and okay
But I have many different layers of rocks
And deep beneath me, my core has lava
Boiling from all the pressure
Like the pressure of succeeding in life
Being the good example in the family
The pressure of not messing up.
Nobody can see this pressure
Until all of it builds up and
Bursts out of my volcano
Hurtting everyone
Everywhere
Even myself.
I’m learning to not beat myself up for my eruptions.

When I do erupt,
I feel indestructible,
Like I can destroy manmade structures,
But they tell me to calm down,
That I’m being paranoid and overreacting.
Humans have left me wounds I cannot heal,
Words I’ll never forget.
Betrayal is the fuel to ignite my fire.

I’m learning I can’t control my emotions
But I can express them in a healthy way.
Obsidian is formed when
Vicious lava cools.
Change comes from anger.
I’m melting my winter into spring.
I’m acknowledging my beautiful waterfalls
My humor
The sun creating rainbows
My kindness
The extraordinary pale green and rose
Of my Aurora Borealis.
I draw.
I sing.
I play soccer.
I speak.
When I stand up for myself, I may cause flames
But fire gives opportunity for new life to grow.

I am Mother Earth
Who designs our reality,
From the reflecting lights of creeks
To the creatures of night.
I am expansive.
I want to become an engineer.
To graduate from Cal Poly University
To make myself and my family proud.
I grow.
I fail.
I rise.
I learn.

I will use my madness as motivation.
I am the Mother of All Creation.
I was in Hetch Hetchy, and there was a switch back that was a thousand feet high and four miles long. I was with two strangers, walking to meet my group that was six more miles away, a distance totaling 10 miles. I had no idea how long 10 miles would take until I did it. All I knew was that I was determined to meet my group. But this hike was not the hardest challenge that I had faced in my life. I have always worn a mask, one that I wear for my protection. Because I feel safe with my mask, I have worn it for so long that it has become a part of me that I can never take off. The mask stops me from opening up to others but gives me comfort in the loneliness. It wasn’t until ARC that I learned how to open myself up to my challenges and to other people through rock climbing and writing a poem about myself.

Before ARC, I was a lonely person without friends. I smiled all the time. I would cover my feelings, pretending to be happy when I was really just a kid trying to keep everything under control, fighting with myself because I never felt good enough and I never wanted to show it. I wanted to smile every single moment because it was better than explaining how I felt. Smiling was my weapon to kill my emotions and keep them for myself, even when those emotions were bigger than me. I was introduced to ARC by Jesus, my instructor, and when I learned about the program, I thought it could be a way to escape my life for some time. I was going to run away from my feelings and that was going to be the best thing that could happen to me because I did not want to confront myself.

When I found out we would be rock climbing, I thought it was going to be easy. But when I started, I got stuck in my head. I felt excited and nervous as the harness tightened, but when I began to feel the rock, I felt frustrated because I couldn’t find spots on the rock to feel stable and get to the top. I spent 15 minutes trying to go up when the rest of the team was already on top of the rocks. I stopped halfway on the 80-foot climb; my body felt tense, tired and stressed. I closed my eyes and wanted to cry, feeling disappointed with myself. I felt, again, the same emotions that I felt in the past when I was learning English and I didn’t have any idea how to speak. When I wanted to buy something or talk to someone, I couldn’t because I didn’t speak English. I felt frustration. I felt a kind of sadness. I felt stressed and I often felt alone because I couldn’t speak and couldn’t make friends. When I was rock climbing, trying to go to the top of the rock, I started to feel the same sensations again - that I was not good enough, that I was the weakest person on the team, that I couldn’t think. I felt that I was there, on the rock, but not learning anything, and I couldn’t figure out how to learn.

After time passed, I stopped my mind. I told myself “I have the capacity to do this; I can learn. I can do it because I am a person with an excellent mind, and I can capture everything; I can absorb information from what people tell me. I can understand.”

I started to think and to find ways to learn. With English, I downloaded an application, Duolingo, on my phone and I changed my phone settings to English. When I could finally understand words, I felt like the most powerful person in the world. After so much time not feeling good enough, I felt like I had the power of the world because I could finally understand what people were saying. When I was stuck on the rock, I stopped my mind again like I’d done with English, and I looked all the way up and said to myself, “I can do this, I have the intelligence and capacity to do this. I can think for myself, find a place to put my hands, and keep going.” I realized I could overcome my own mind, and that I could accept all my feelings and fears. Rock climbing helped me discover my inner strength that I had no idea existed. At the end of rock climbing, I felt satisfied with myself because I learned a new way to confront challenges in my life. I learned how to open my mind when I am lost in a problem.

Writing my poem this summer also helped me be more open with myself in a transparent way. Writing was hard because I had to go into my mind and explore everything about myself. I always found it hard to express myself and to be comfortable with my emotions. When I started to explore my mind, I saw that of the many of the emotions I have, the biggest is anger. I am tired of pretending that everything is fine when it is not. I often didn’t speak and stand up; I let others write my sentences for me—many people that I know, friends and family. I didn’t write my own sentences, my life, for myself. But now, I’m creating my own story.

ARC taught me that I can find a way to manage my feelings. Now I am stronger, and I have the capacity to be myself and fight for what I want and who I am. I want to fight for the rights of everyone, and specifically for people who don’t speak English, so that people who do speak English will respect them and see them as intelligent, wise, strong, philosophical, capable and human.

I want to share advice that I have learned in ARC: There is always a chance to discover part of yourself that you never knew before. Embrace your feelings. You can change them; they don’t control you. However, when you face those emotions, you do have to feel them, which can be scary. But remember, even when your emotions scare you, even when you feel stuck, you can open your mind. You are the person in control.
scenes from the summer
scenes from the summer
scenes from the summer
Adventure Risk Challenge would like to thank the following organizations and individuals for their generous support and collaboration during our Summer Immersion Courses in Truckee, Yosemite, and Sequoia National Park:

Key Summer Partnerships: Yosemite-Wawona Elementary Charter School - Stacy Boydstun and School Board Members; Yosemite National Park - Heidi Edgecomb, Laura Goforth, Lissie Kretsch, Jessica Rivas, Martijn Ouborg; Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks - Christy Brigham, Laura Barcos, Tarryn Bartkus, Jenny Kirk; US Forest Service - Don Lane, Gay Eitel; Aim High; Boys and Girls Club of Merced; Project Discovery; Santa Teresita Youth Conference Center; Southern Yosemite Mountain Guides; Summer Search; Tahoe Truckee Unified School District; Tahoe Food Hub; and Tahoe SAFE Alliance.

Our Dedicated Summer Volunteers: Trisha Baird, Belinda Braunstein, Katie Burns, Jonathan Burton, Carrie Campbell, Luis Carrillo, Marnie Cobbs, Eve Giovenco, Tara House, Barbara Ilfeld, Anne Lindemann, Kasey McMunkin, Chloe Morfett, Marianne Porter, Danielle Rees, Anna Santoleri, Nicole Sayegh, Jessica Sheet, Shirley Spencer, Liz Tucker, and Katie Zanto; our Community Interview Day participants; the ARC Advisory Council; and the ARC Board of Directors.

Without all of you, this extraordinary program would not be possible!