



Paolo Freire Students Find Freedom in the Hills

by Treven Hooker

On October 3, 2016, 12 brave students from Paulo Freire Freedom School (PFFS) loaded their gear into a vehicle, and started a four-day backpacking trip in the Santa Rita Mountains. The students were accompanied a great crew of staff, including Marcus and Areal, two teachers from PFFS, as well as Lisa Woods, my co-leader.

The rough edges of the Sonoran Desert soon transformed into the velvet grasslands of southern Arizona. As we started our drive down a long dirt road to our first night's camp, a massive gopher snake crossed our path. We stopped our vehicles and took the opportunity to observe the snake from a safe distance. The students used critical observation skills to describe key feature of the snake. It was a great way to start our adventure.

A short distance from Kentucky Camp, we found a perfect place set up our shelters and kitchen. The students soon set off in search of the least rocky places to set up their tents, and with help of staff, each student found a prime location with 360-degree views of massive blue mountains rising out of the grasslands.



During a scheduled time for journaling, two students walking along the dirt road saw a beautiful black-tailed rattlesnake bathing in the sun. The two students were frightened, but curious and called the group over. We watched from a safe distance and discussed some of the highly specialized features that make rattlesnakes unique. The viper soon became uncomfortable with our presence and raised half its body off the ground to form a large bow like shape. It did this to seem larger and more formidable than it already was. Then it used its muscular body to quickly escape into the grass. The display was everything we could have asked for, and gave the students a lot of respect for the snake.



After every student and staff was content and satisfied with camp, Mac Donaldson arrived to greet us. Mac is the owner and operator of the Open Cross Ranch in the Canelo Hills. As well and ranching, Mac is incredibly passionate about ecosystem sustainability and uses that passion in all aspects of his ranching practices. His family has been ranching in the region for generations. Mac shared the history of the area, and offered practical ways to preserve and strengthen the ecosystems and habitats of Southern Arizona.

After Mac said farewell, it was time for dinner. The intense yellow sun had transformed into a vibrantly orange ball that sank lazily behind

the Santa Rita Mountains. A lesson was given on how to use personal camp stoves properly, camp kitchen/cooking tips, and how to prepare the meal of the night. The students were split into groups of four, with three students in each sharing a stove. It is always nice listening to youth bond by conversation, jokes, and laughter while cooking under the stars.

After dinner and dishes, each student found themselves lying on the ground observing every star in the sky. The Milky Way stole the show while the moon was hiding, letting us talk about the universe, constellations, ancient cultures, and anywhere our imaginations took us. We did so until it was time for the students to lay their heads down. Soon, laughter gave way to the sounds of crickets.

The sun rose on day two, chasing the cold of the night away. Students woke not too long after, and found themselves ready for breakfast. After the students fueled up they strategically organized their gear into their backpacks, preparing for the day's backpacking adventure. The group hiked down to Kentucky Camp, a well-preserved and recently restored mining camp that tells the rich history of this area. Maps of the trail were given to each student, and we all looked together at today's route. We discussed topography, navigation, basic orientation, and each student's responsibilities of studying their map in order to provide security in location and travel. With lunches packed, water filled, and bags strapped to our backs, we began our 6-mile hike toward Tunnel Spring.

Tall grasses reached out to touch our faces as we hiked past. I found the grass to be quite nice, golden yellow, with a silver glare from the sun. The students, however, did not share my appreciation. The grass was invasive to boots and clothing, depositing itchy seeds at every opportunity. Although the students found a new element to battle, they forged on, covering a lot of ground in a short period of time. For most of these students it was their first time backpacking. The struggle was real, but so was the reward.

As we walked, a confident 6th grader named Myles led the group forward. He practiced his orienteering by reading the topographic map, using contour lines to find our general location, and the compass to triangulate approximately where we might be. The two notions of wild and wilderness became one as students realized every step led them farther from home, parents, school, roads, cities, and most of their personal comforts. All urban noises were replaced by talkative ravens, singing blue jays, and wind-thrashed leaves. Students became comfortable on uneven ground. Water became the beverage of choice, and grass tips became the chewer's preference over gum.

Hours passed as we hiked through rolling yellow hills. Our direction of travel was southwest, which led us closer to the massive Santa Rita Mountains with each step. Soon, yellow grasses were replaced with oak forests, and rolling hills turned into valleys. We found ourselves crossing a flowing stream of water, which quickly cause boots and socks to fly high while bags were tossed aside. The cool water soothed overheated feet, and like a hot skillet in water, the cooling process



caused a chorus of noise. Students and staff laughed, splashed, and explored the luxurious stream. Some students practiced using water filters, and later described this being one of the most impressionable aspects of the trip because they had never collected their own water, let alone filtered it. After we were cooled off and our water bottles were full, our progress continued.



The oaks soon gave way to junipers and pines, and the trail became soft and dark brown. Streams and pools of water became a common theme around every bend. After six miles and much effort, we finally came to our camp site near the Tunnel Spring Trailhead. Lisa drove rugged forest roads to meet us at our campsite, carrying extra water, food and supplies. Students eagerly dropped their packs and rejoiced at their accomplishment. After a much-needed break, tents were set up, and the camp kitchen was quickly assembled to battle the forces of hunger that marched heavily on our camp.

Dinner is always a spectacle. Again, students formed into their cooking groups, pulled out their preferred instant backpacker meal, and began the demanding process of cooking. For most students, this was a lesson in multitasking. Uneven ground made balancing a pot of water on a small backpack stove difficult. Then, safely pouring water into packages or bowls all while staying dry and clean was a task most had never tried. Yet, the process went without interruption as each student

handled the endeavor with a good attitude. One of my favorite aspects of backcountry travel is the sound of laughter, and stories over meals and dinner. No TV, cell phones, or video games were present to interrupt natural communal interaction.

After we re-energized, students collected their journals, pencils, and markers and set out individually to organize and record thoughts, feelings, and observations. Journaling was important to our trip, and students took the task seriously. Some youth spent a considerable amount of time expressing themselves through drawing and journaling. As the sun set the forest grew darker. With darkness came an ever growing chill, as if the forest was forcing us into our tents to make room for the creatures that wander the night.

But sleep was not in the agenda quite yet. Students scattered to collect natural fuel to burn. Arms returned to camp full of wood, leaves, and grass. Students quickly assembled a fire, those who knew the process taught those who did not. With the quickness that conquered their hunger, a fire was constructed and burning furiously. The independent groups merged and soon the whole group was chattering and laughing. Our voices competed with the calls of insects, the chirping echolocation of bats on the hunt, and the distant yelps of coyotes.

Day three brought new confidence in students' migratory ability. Our feet moved quickly as each student found new confidence in their abilities. Today's walk along the Arizona Trail took us through lush forests, along with a rich aroma that can only be found in the presence of pines.

Visions of dry creeks, empty pools, and dehydrated students haunted my mind. We had planned for dry camping, having our support vehicle meet us at each campsite. Yet even with that reassurance,

it is always nice to encounter water along the trail. To my surprise, pools of water were scattered throughout. Fish and aquatic bugs thrived in the Santa Ritas. Intermittent streams allowed us to soak our feet and foreheads. This wonderful gift set us up for high-performance hiking.

The steep and narrow trail came with a healthy dose of elevation. By this time, students and staff were sore, tired, and seeing mirages of camp. Just when it seemed we were at our quitting point, a riddle was told to the students. A successful trail tool, the students became so preoccupied with the riddle, they almost forgot about the pain and exhaustion. It was only when we reached the summit of our climb that the answer was discovered. To everyone's surprise, the students successfully completed the most challenging part of the trip with energy to spare. This accomplishment was fuel in the tank, taking us all the way to our camp for the evening.

Our camp was crowned with a flowing creek, and just upstream were deep pools and small waterfalls. Students anxiously tossed their shoes and socks for a quick soak. Once stinky feet had been cooled and cleaned, interest and curiosity flooded back in, and the students began hiking up the slick rocks. The students who remained got the first pick on real estate, setting up camp on the softest, flattest ground.



Everyone worked together to set up camp, collect firewood, and organize our gear so tomorrow we could depart without leaving a trace. Under a clear night sky, we shared smores, laughter, and stories. It was as solemn as it was happy, for each student knew this would be the last night under the stars together. After supper and dessert was in the belly and the fire's heat began to drag the eyelids down, students retreated for their tents. Soon it was quiet, with only a great horned owls hooting to break the silence.

That morning, students quickly assembled their gear, helped load the vehicle with everything that could fit, and sped off down the trail – a long decent toward Patagonia. We watched the biotic communities change dramatically as we walked along, from pines to oaks and then into the riparian gallery found within the canyon's drainages. The trailhead at Temporal Gulch was covered in lush foliage and flowing water, providing refreshing shade and water to the students as they finished their adventure.

The youth were all thrilled to be back, but many expressed how they would miss the mountains and canyons. All in all, everyone agreed it was one of the best experienced of their lives, and that their perspective on the outdoors has changed forever. This expedition along the Arizona Trail was over for now, but opportunities for other adventures would always be waiting.



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