



## Overcoming Obstacles

by Treven Hooker

On December 10, 2016, five youth from the town of Patagonia assembled at the Patagonia Youth Enrichment Center (PYEC). The PYEC is an afterschool program that offers unlimited opportunities for youth development and growth. Steve and Anna Coleman run this center, and are committed to involving youth in the Seeds of Stewardship program.

On this day, the kids geared up and were ready for an expedition, though they had no idea of the epic adventure they were about to embark on. Patagonia is a land of golden color. Tall rolling hills provide vistas of vast, yellow grasslands only interrupted by massive Sky Islands that shine blue in the distance. The endless, golden view shines with streaks of white and silver as the intense sunlight is reflected off grass tufts. This type of environment holds a soft and nurturing character. This is just one of the reasons that our adventurous location was so stunning.

Our drive was short, as we headed up into the Patagonia Mountains. Our drive in was on a red, two-track road, surrounded by grass, ocotillo and agave. As we ascended, a deep canyon became visible to our right, an intimidating view as our van drove parallel only feet from a steep slope that entered the gorge. We parked at a small pullout, and students unloaded, excited but nervous. We approached the canyon from the side of a tall butte and peered into the abyss. The kids explored echoes with loud calls, which was a surprisingly powerful acoustic setting.



I prepped the students, letting them know that our adventure would be taking us through a slot canyon. This canyon would require excellent team work, leadership, and honest communication regarding students' comfort levels and capability. We began by treading down a very steep slope. The bottom was accessible by maneuvering on our hands, feet and butts. The group stayed tight as to prevent dangerous rock collisions, and careful movements kept rocks from sliding at all.

Tiny eroded pebbles and sand met us at the bottom, along with tall oak trees that grew in sometimes tight thick bunches. Sunlight failed to directly reach this depth, giving the canyon an ominous aura. We started west, and were immediately greeted with a funnel like entrance and a massive boulder wedged in the way. Sharp red and grey walls were compressed with only three or four feet of space separating them. The boulder demanded a quick decision – to traverse above and climb the giant, or crawl the narrow

space underneath. Students picked their route, helping one another through like pros.

Once fully inside the canyon, we were in awe of its beauty. I explained that massive volcanic aggression had formed this area, and that the canyon is the result of lava and ash flow that had been cut by water and wind over millions of years. A variety of rocks made excellent holds as we scrambled our way through. The further we embarked, the taller the walls became. Some points of the path were so narrow we had to squeeze through sideways. Other times the path was blocked by piles of wedged rocks and boulders, requiring each of us to help one another up and over. In one instance, a pool of water presented a formidable obstacle. With arms and legs sprawling out, students and staff had to wedge their bodies inch by inch to move closer to the other side. One slip and your lower half would become soaked. Every student made it safely across, except one who slipped and took an unfortunate but refreshing dip in the cool canyon water. With smiles and enthusiasm, we continued on.

Each student was aware that we might come across an impassable obstacle. After an hour of traversing, we came across one such obstacle. We sat and brainstormed how we might get over it. Staff attempted the climb, and although doable, the risk was too high for the students. We all agreed that we would settle down here for lunch, and marvel at the tall walls and thin sliver of blue sky.

Hiking back, we found our recent obstacles shifted into new challenges. The downclimbs and scrabbling we had just hiked on our way in was now of a different incline. Students showed an increased skill in moving over uneven ground. We made our way back to the boulder that stopped us initially. This time the boulder was passed with ease. Students showed incredible amounts of bravery and capability in their own ways, finding routes to overcome their internal and external obstacles.

Before returning, we circled up and had a conversation about sustainability and stewardship. I explained that this place was hardly touched by people, yet we still found trash at the bottom. The students expressed distaste and displeasure at the rude treatment of such a fun and beautiful place. I explained that it was up to each of them to protect, advocate, and teach others about the delicate, natural landscapes that give us such pleasure. With that we loaded up in the van and we made our way back to Patagonia.

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