On October 26, 11 students from City High School embarked on a Sonoran Desert Adventure on the David Yetman Trail in Tucson Mountain Park. This is the second expedition of the semester. This class is a literacy class at City High, and our goal was to explore literature in the outdoors, the relationship between the two, and how to improve our relationships with both. It was a warm October day, and a perfect opportunity to hit the trail.

The hike began by dropping into a lush arroyo. Here a clear view of the surrounding mountains made the winding arroyo path seem like a canyon. Towering saguaros loomed high into the sky, peering down on us. I asked the students to think about their relationship with the outdoors, and what they want their relationship to be. Hiking in the desert drives a wicked thirst into the throat. This prompted us to discuss the importance the arroyos, how they surge with rain, and the dependency the flora and fauna have on them. A student asked if they once flowed constantly. I explained that I did not know the answer, but this area used to receive a lot more moisture, and it could have been a possibility to find year-round water.

The students were making great time, with quick speed. This type of movement in the desert can cost a lot of much needed sweat, so breaks were taken often. Here students found the true value of shade, as temperatures seemed to drop dramatically. Tucked under mesquite, palo verde, and ironwood trees, students were able to rest and appreciate these desert saviours. It is a delicate line that determines what and when a creature can roam freely. Mid-day seemed to be the hour of the reptile, as they ran along rock sides and sandy floors. Their scurries were accompanied by songs of white-winged dove, cactus wrens and phainopeplas.

After an hour of hiking, we reached the old Bowen Homestead structure that was built in the early 1900’s. We dropped our packs and students were set free to roam the desert. Students were quick to hike up nearby mountains, while others remained in the quietly peaceful house to rest and observe. After their remaining energy was burned, students were called back to the house to eat lunch, and hear a wonderful story written by Byrd Baylor.

“Tell me who your favorite person is” is a story about two friends describing their favorite things, mostly related to the desert. This offered a new perspective of how to view our passions, interests
and favorites. Once the book was finished, I gave the students a journaling prompt and sent them off into the desert. The prompts were to direct the students’ attention to people, places, and things they truly loved, and to describe what qualities they loved and why. Then I asked students to journal what it is about themselves they loved. My intention was to help students build a positive relationship with themselves, others, and the natural landscapes that help us build these wonderful emotions.

Emotional conversations followed these journaling exercises, and once we finished students set out again to explore, play and define their desert relationships further. On our return to school we hiked the arroyo the entire way, exploring new territory and views. The students seemed much more engaged, in-tune, and comfortable on the return hike. We made it back in great time, got into the van, and cranked the A/C. Our second expedition of the semester was a success, and students returned to the school with sweat and smiles.