

Inspired From the Woods

By Erin Albanese

It was probably at the 45 minute mark that the decision really needed to be made. It was certainly my choice, my trip, and most assuredly, my responsibility. I had guided these woods for nearly 15 years; mostly following routes with a scheduled check point, easy evacuations, and somewhat reliable reception. Nevertheless, there was a substantial challenge put to this team of four female Wilderness Instructors. Some of us were right out of dance school while others were significantly skilled in wilderness living and guiding. It was a beautiful orchestra of talent and perspective. And so after almost an hour of crouching and crawling over partially frozen moss and swamp with bezels turning and no directional sunlight there was a less than upbeat crowd behind me. Only then did I begin to take notice of where exactly I was.

Yes of course, I was approaching a swamp, most likely a stream a few hundred yards later, not sure yet how deep. We should be approaching the access road soon thereafter and by my calculations at this rate, only minutes before dusk. But it was my head that started to confuse me. I looked around to my group for inspiration. My crew has been working these woods for an average of about 4 weeks straight. This was a group of 8 teenage girls that were less than thrilled to be in the great North Woods. My co- leaders were seasoned about the average of six months. We were trained and teaching survival of course; the eating, sleeping and warming kind. Many of us were also invested in making a difference in ourselves, but this was not the time for that...or was it? We were strictly in survival mode. I was confident in everyone's ability to handle the conditions, but certainly not alone. I had my map and I had my compass. We were all very well prepared with water and snacks, a few packs with a couple of changes of clothes, a solid foundation for a stroll into the woods. I also was aware that with the preparation of this trip there were people who even knew exactly where I was. Yet, I was completely lost. How can I lead this trip without anyone with me, with everyone against me? We were scared. We were blind. We were unfamiliar with

our surroundings at the most primary conditions. I thought seriously about turning a around right here.

The girls began to lose confidence in me and the other leaders. They were watching us intently map out our route again and again, checking our bearings one two and three times within sometimes less than ten paces between, and loading an energy that may have glowed with red. Mumbles and grumbles were growing from all parties. The group began to see me falter, question and remain puzzled. It was here that something happened from within or without, I'm not quite sure. It was a message that may have been building from the beginning, or made for the moment. Regardless, it was a message that was created out of passion and desire to believe in a mission.

If I had continued to lead this group through my fears and hesitation, letting the group's fears and hesitations grow, this trip would have been a failure. But we continued without hesitation anymore, and created an experience with a myriad of symbolism and chapters of life lessons. I took a deep breath. And a pressure came over me that sent the message that this experience was no longer going to be about me.

I had already learned my way, my skill, leadership and supposedly my confidence. It was all the things I was or trying to be that stood in the way and stood to confuse me.

And I stepped back. With a breath I let go. I let go of all that held me back from giving all I could and all I knew. And it was at this moment I was relieved to be in the middle of nowhere, not seeing in front or behind me and was confident of all the skills of those around me and finally confident of all the skills I had.

In the worst case scenario, I would independently use my skills. At this point, I gave these to everyone I was with, and essentially let the trip finish itself. There were times we made decisions together, there were times the team made decisions on their own and there were times the team looked to me for help. But for the next few miles we were traveling blinded, lead solely by self assuredness

and a little bit of magnetism a some of the most powerful sermons by our students.

I've taken this trip with me through many experiences and relationships. In essence we are most effectively influential when we are focused on the success of our partners and those around us. But at the same time so aware of where we are as individuals. It is so necessary though to share this message and vision of mission. And only here will we be able to light our way and then to light the way of others.