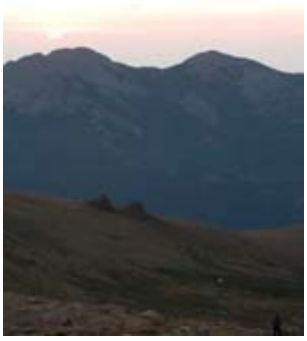
VENTURE OUT

A transformational healing experience in nature



The day begins with four families tentatively driving minivans down a dirt road outside of St. Petersburg, Florida to meet their counselors for their first overnight "camp" experience. Most of them have never slept in a sleeping bag and have only experienced life without electricity from power outages. They reek of clean—the scent of shampoo and soap wafting into the air as they step out of the car.

Short experiential outdoor programs such as this one that I organized, much like wilderness therapy expeditions, are meant to address dysfunctional behavioral problems through immersion in an unfamiliar environment. These families participate for different reasons and come from different configurations—single parent, step-parent and two parent households. They've been working for three months with their counselor to prepare emotionally, physically, and behaviorally for their outdoor adventure. Their healing journey starts off in the office participating in experiential activities, then moves to a field near the parking lot where various activities engage participants in group decision making and connection.

In one of the first activities they practice following directions, an important skill as we head into activities with a far greater risk of injury. I feel the need to engage this group of 8 to 16 year old youth where they're at, before I lead them into the outdoors, so I invite them to be transformed into robots, something far more familiar to them than their current natural surroundings. I tell them that they have special abilities, but can only do what their "robot commander" non-verbally instructs them to do. To their dismay, I assign the parents as the robot commanders. They're responsible to start, stop, and safely guide the robots. Robots send out SOS signals to alert their robot commanders if they're in danger. "BEEP! BEEP! I am in danger! I am in danger!" a chirpy 12 year old quickly offers up. Movement is simple: a tap on the head for going forward or to stop, a tap on the shoulder to turn that direction (90 degrees), and a tap on the back to turn 180 degrees. After a few minutes we switch roles—now the parents are the robots and the youth are the robot commanders. The discussion that follows provides a foundation for our entire experience. It includes how we can confuse even simple

directions, what we do when we "make a mistake" with the directions, and what it's like to follow or give directions.

Already filled with more energy from simply being outside and playing together, I ask the group if they're ready to step down the dirt path to our next outdoor adventure— canoeing. Now, as they face what they feel is the wilderness, they have the worried, wide-eyed anticipation of what might be in store by spending time out-of-doors, far from their concrete-confined urban lives. Clustered tightly together, the conversation focuses on snakes and fierce wildlife they might encounter. As we begin our walk, I invite the group to be on the lookout for something in nature that represents a strength or ability in them that might help us on our trip. When they find it, they're to inform us so we can stop, look, and listen to their story. Jason, a 16 year old often identified as the "troubled" one, stops the group first, pointing at a rotting log. I wonder where he might go with this as he begins sharing. "I picked this rotting log because that's what you all think I am, nothing better than a lazy kid rotting away my life. But if you look closely, you'll see that there's all sorts of life on this log. So no matter how bad things look, there is still good." Everyone is still, quietly watching Jason and his mother and step-father. Tears slowly fill his mother's eyes as she reaches out to hug him. Jason responds with a quick, sideways hug of an embarrassed teenager. The first hug I've ever seen him give his mother.

By the time we arrive at the canoe docks, everyone had shared their connection with nature and are slightly more familiar with their current natural environment. At the dock, we review the safety guidelines and, as if on cue, during review of the paddle commands for safety, one youth connects our experiences by stating, "Oh, no wonder we practiced non-verbal communication, 'cause we might not hear someone in another canoe!" After climbing into the canoes we learn some basic paddling strokes, then go off to explore. Excited voices and laughter echo against the banks as they drink in both the excitement of the adventure and the shared experience with family.

Our landing spot takes us right to our exploration into the trees. After fitting harnesses and helmets for safety, clients use a rope and pulley system to explore the canopy, learning about the trees as well as about themselves. The disconnect between nature and youth can sometimes be astounding, as one youth asks if he has to worry about altitude sickness up in the tree. When we're all safely returned to the ground, a 12 year old client sums up the experience with, "I didn't think I could do this, but I learned that if I'm struggling, I can ask for help. And if I see

someone who's struggling, I might be the one in a position that I can help."

We take some time to set up camp with everyone helping out. As darkness falls and worries increase, we take a night hike without flashlights. Youth giggle as the adults jump at the sound of crashing brush—a sound we could only guess is an armadillo. We take our time exploring the dark through a variety of activities designed to increase comfort in the outdoors and to encourage shared adventure, such as exploring how human senses adapt to the darkness and searching for evidence of nighttime animals.

It was over all too quickly in the morning when, after making our breakfast, we begin the hike back to the cars. We'd spent our time challenging our minds and our bodies, far from the familiar scenes that keep us in our familiar mindsets. We not only learned and practiced the skills to help us be better people; we reconnected to the healing powers of nature. We've known for centuries of this power. Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, is quoted as saying, "Nature cures, not the physician." These families found this powerful medicine through inspiration and restoration by connecting with nature in ways they cannot in their concrete world. By the end, we were not only covered with the dirt of living in the out-of-doors, but with smiles and a gentler understanding of who we are in relation to others and the world around us.

Maurie Lung is a licensed therapist practicing in the Tampa Bay area. She provides counseling in an outpatient setting primarily from a Solutions-focused therapeutic model, integrating adventure into both individual and group sessions. For more information visit: www.lifeadventurescc.org

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