

Chatham Courier

Outward Bound youth leaders graduate after 14 days in the wilds

By LAURA JOELSSON Contributing Writer

August 2, 2022



Members of the Echo trail team of this year's New Jersey Youth Leadership Corps are, standing from left, instructors Ritam Chakraborty and Sam Sharp, Alex Meza of Plainfield, Charlie Hudson of Byram Township, Amber Greene of East Orange, Rose Doherty of Newton and Jesse Trujillo of Hillsborough. Kneeling, from left, are Campbell Portland of Mendham, Sathiskaran Nagarasa of Elizabeth, Shivani Shelki of Hillsborough and Gabrielle Yannotta of Chatham.

Photo by Laura Joelsson

The New Jersey Youth Leadership Corps (NJYLC) embarked on 14 days of wilderness living featuring rock climbing, canoeing, and hiking in Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area on July 4th.

On Sunday, July 17, the 23 students reunited with their families in a celebration at the Brady Life Camp in Pottersville for their graduation from the Outward Bound program.

The New Jersey Youth Leadership Corps is a merit-based scholarship expedition awarded to some of the area's elite youth leaders entering grades 10 through 12 seeking to challenge themselves and discover their leadership potential.

Said student Kimia Baombwa of East Orange: "I think that I redefined the character traits that I had, like being a leader, being compassionate, and showing love to my peers.

"Something that I really got over was my fear. Once we were out there, we weren't picky with our food anymore, we weren't scared to sleep outside, we were like free."

The fully funded scholarship course is funded by private dollars from New Jersey donors, allowing lower-income families to provide the opportunity for their kids to be out in nature.

“We don’t look at where you’re coming from,” said Jennifer Raymond, the scholarship and recruitment manager. “We have an application fee of \$50 which may be nothing to us, but to some families, that’s a lot.”

In order to allow the Outward Bound experience to be accessible for everyone, the application fee may be waived entirely for families who need it.

“Most students coming from any income bracket don’t have hundreds of dollars worth of outdoor gear,” said John Frisbee, the director of development at the Philadelphia Outward Bound School, which runs the program.

“So, back in Philadelphia, we have a huge room full of hiking boots, rain gear, fleece tops, you name it. Those pieces of equipment get used on course and then reused.”

This particular Outward Bound program was started by former Far Hills resident and mayor Mike Stanley in 2003, almost 20 years ago.

Heather Rosser is the program manager and instructor for the Outward Bound School. “They are a very diverse group,” Rosser said about this year’s graduates.

“I think the most profound thing that happens is that they are supported and assisted to work through differences between them,” Rosser said.

“At some point during the course, their niceness to each other breaks down, and they’re not so accommodating to each other’s differences. That’s the point where they really get a lot of assistance.”

Even though they seem very different on the surface, the course allows the students to find out that they aren’t really so different after all, she said.

“I think the most mentally challenging part was probably the rock climbing because you had to trust somebody with your life to have you go up and down the rocks, and it was steep,” Kimia Baombwa said.

Others liked the canoeing.

“My favorite memory was canoeing on the Delaware River when we were paddling in the rapids. The first rapids we went through were so fun,” Ava Basilone of Hillsborough said.

The expeditions are led by instructors who ensure the safety and well-being of the students. Katie Nelson, the director of Program and Safety, is also out on the course with them and manages all of the behind-the-scenes tasks.

Nelson said her favorite part is “getting to work with amazing students and a beautiful course area, and really truly our staff.”

The students struggle with various challenges while out on the course.

“For some of them, the challenge is physical, and for some of them it's mental,” says Nelson. “For some of them, it’s managing social dynamics. Being out with a group of people that you started off not knowing and going through challenges together.”

Most of these students had never done anything like this before, coming from towns such as East Orange or Newark that don’t have a lot of nature accessible. Said student Janiyah Samm of Irvington: "It was a difference to be yourself around people you didn't know.

"When we first started hiking we would argue all the time in the group which was probably my least favorite part," Samm said. "But, we figured out each other's strengths and weaknesses and applied that to our hiking."

Al'din Ingrim of Newark quipped: “My trail name is Beetle because I ran into a beetle out there and we became good friends.”

When asked what their least favorite memory was, a collective sigh came from the group.

“The mud.”