

# DAILY LOCAL NEWS

## Chester County connections bring Philadelphia Outward Bound experience to local adults, kids



*Students work on the high ropes.*

June 14, 2024

As a West Chester University student, Erica Montemayor engaged with Outward Bound USA, as a means to fulfilling requirements for her Psychology major. Today, a senior associate director of Wharton Leadership Ventures, Erica credits that one decision for launching a career journey that has enriched her life and has helped transform the lives of hundreds of youth, college students, and professionals in and around the West Chester community.

“Outward Bound is so meaningful to me, and a huge intersection in my life,” said Erica. “Outward Bound transformed me into the leader I wanted to be — one who leads with compassion and excellence, and values community and giving back. I carry my experiences with me and bring these things to my students so they can grow into the leaders and other roles they want for themselves.”

After completing her final year at West Chester, Erica continued to work with Outward Bound USA, leading expeditions for teenagers — many who were court-ordered to participate — that presented a diversity of backgrounds and challenges. During this time Erica learned about Philadelphia Outward Bound School. POBS’s community-based programs fit perfectly with her training, psychology background, and evolving career vision.

“We have this beautiful gem in Philly which has so much to offer for youth and adults in terms of team-building and leadership development,” said Erica. “And it continues to offer so much to me too. We all learn about ourselves by stepping out of what is comfortable and being vulnerable.”

Erica worked with POBS for eight years. As a POBS instructor, she especially cherished the work she did with the West Chester girls’ expedition, a summer high school leadership course. She also led courses for students and teachers and took every opportunity to give herself experiences with as many different types of populations as possible. Erica transitioned into a POBS staff trainer with oversight of all staff. For her, this was a great opportunity to give back by using her experiences to grow new instructors.

When an opportunity opened with Wharton Leadership Ventures, Erica considered it “serendipitous.” Although she wasn’t looking to leave POBS, the job was a way for her to use all her Outward Bound and POBS experiences, training, leadership development, and personal growth to further pay it forward in helping shape the upcoming generation of professional leaders.

After establishing herself in the position, Erica saw a natural connection between Wharton Leadership Ventures — co-curricular experiential learning opportunities designed to teach leadership through challenging experiences in remote and unfamiliar environments — and POBS’ professional development program, OB Pro. Since 2017 OB Pro has provided businesses of all types with team-oriented programs designed to empower personal growth and organizational success.

“OB Pro is something local our students can do,” said Erica, who has connected OB Pro to Wharton programs beyond Leadership Ventures. “Undergrads at Wharton don’t get

off campus often and stay within their bubble of comfort. OB Pro is a chance to explore and try something completely different, see themselves in a different context, and meet new friends.”

Even though it is not offered for credit, POBS serves 80 Wharton Leadership Ventures students annually—which speaks volumes about the value of the hands-on leadership experiences and growth the programming provides. OB Pro serves students onsite in Philadelphia as well as brings training to venture fellows on the Wharton Campus.

“The feedback is effusive with comments about how powerful the program is. Students really appreciate being challenged and having a way to put down their need to be high-performing all the time. I’ve seen the experience of how getting uncomfortable can transform teams in one day. Being able to struggle, be real, and ask for help has a huge impact.”

Another local connection, Rotarian Dennis Wallace, has empowered youth through his “Team Rotary,” which, since 2015 has raised around \$150,000 to give local youth access to POBS’ life-changing experiences. The journey for the West Chester resident began when he learned that PA State Senator Carolyn Comitta, the town’s mayor at the time, was a POBS alum highly influential in bringing its programs to underserved youth.



*Canoeing is a favorite activity.*

“I was stunned and moved by a story about a West Chester high school graduate entangled in human trafficking,” said Dennis. “The light went on and I realized I could help by making connections with POBS. That year I got each Rotary club to sponsor a girl from the West Chester area school district for a POBS backpacking expedition. The first year I established Team Rotary, we had 15 people rappel and raised \$40,000 for POBS’ biennial Building Adventure event.

Dennis, Mayor Comitta and the former superintendent of the West Chester Area School District Jim Scanlon met with POBS to design a program specifically addressing the backgrounds and challenges of these young women. Understanding the steep hurdles this population faced, Dennis pushed for the program to be a week or longer.

“The program also had to give them enough time to learn and grow. For us to affect change we had to make it a full immersive experience,” said Dennis.

Today, Team Rotary is going strong and is a top fundraiser during Building Adventure, most recently raising \$25,000 through the participation of 12 individuals. More important is the impact Dennis’ efforts continue to make on local youth. He humbly shares that it is the cause and its impact that keeps him moving forward with the initiative.

“I think of that child our programming might prevent from making a poor life choice,” said Dennis. “The letters we get from participants in our summer expeditions are so heart-warming and emotional. They express how meaningful the experiences are for them — how their time with POBS instilled them with confidence and gave them lifetime memories. Words cannot express the feelings when you realize you’ve had this type of impact on someone’s life.”