

A Message from Commissioner Dorantes

Early detection saves lives.

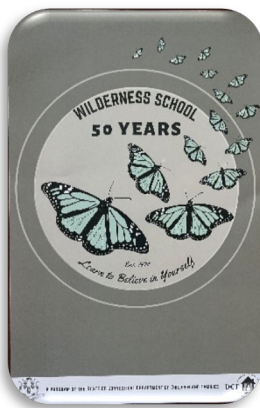


While the month of October signifies many themes, for me personally, there is none greater than Breast Cancer Awareness. My fight with cancer began approximately 9 months after my appointment as DCF's Commissioner. According to the American Cancer Society, in 2022 Black women still have a 4% lower *incidence* rate of breast cancer than White women but a **40% higher breast cancer death rate**. October amplifies the early detection message as a firm reminder to you, family members, friends, and colleagues to not take your health for granted. Wearing pink honors survivors and those battling this disease However, wearing pink doesn't address breast cancer - **early detection does.**

Congratulations are in order!!! **Kris Robles, Alison Karimi and Dr. Polly Marston** were honored by the **Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV)** at the "First 100 Plus Breakfast and Awards Ceremony." The event honored 100 individuals who are leading efforts across the state to improve outcomes for survivors of intimate partner violence, their children, and communities. In this month's "Spotlight on What's Right," the trio provides additional insights into supportive resources.



In our small state alone, Connecticut has had an average of **14** IPV-related **deaths every year** since **2000**. If you need help or just someone to talk to, please visit CTSAFEConnect.org or call or text or chat **(888) 774-2900**. Advocates are available 24/7. Consider the children exposed and families impacted...**THERE'S HELP!**



Happy 50th Anniversary Wilderness School!

Founded in 1974 as a prevention, intervention, and transition program for CT adolescents, the program model is rooted in positive youth development. **Congratulations** to Director **Aaron Wiebe** and the dedicated full-time and seasonal staff who have served thousands



of young people over the decades. This month's *Spotlight* shares more about the Wilderness School and how current and past participants describe the impact the programs have had on their lives.

Eric Carlson, Allaith Ghaibah, and Ellen Stumph are three of the Wilderness School's seasonal staff. Read how they were attacked by a bobcat during an off-site expedition yet courageously maintained the safety of all of the youth in their charge. "Looking at it now, I think it's a testament to the power of the human spirit and the overall importance of working together collaboratively," Eric stated.



"Maria Chose to Blossom"

Maria, a Transitional Aged Youth (TAY) was recently selected by the Annie E. Casey Foundation for the **2023 Cohort of Jim Casey Fellows!**

A remarkably strong young woman, Maria describes her journey within the system, an incredible relationship with Social Worker **Gina Cluff**, and her future advocacy plans!



Yvette Seda, Social Worker in the Milford Office, was awarded the **2023 William Rivera**

Humanitarian Award!!!! *"Being an advocate and educator is a part of who Yvette is and that is evident every day in her interactions with the families she serves," stated her supervisor Jacquelyn Diggs.* She received this recognition during the Central Office **Hispanic and Latino (a,e) Heritage Month** program. This celebration of culture and pride spans September 15th through October 15th annually.



Empowering the Next Generation

Earlier this month, I had the privilege of attending the Shiloh Baptist Church Prison Ministry's **Annual**



Community Awareness and Prevention forum held at Mitchell College. It was a pleasure to join State Representative Anthony Nolan, New London Mayor Mike Passero, Attorney Lonnie Braxton and DCF Supervisor **Winston Taylor**. We were all empowered to use our collective voices to support young people and their mental health through civic activism.

Last but certainly not least, a multidisciplinary group of child welfare professionals from the state of **California** visited CT DCF to understand more about our Careline, Differential Response System, Prevention Framework and Behavioral Health System along with many other aspects of our work. Kudos to Director **Lisa Daymonde** who coordinated it all with the support of Casey Family Programs. The trip from the California delegation included visits to **Wheeler Clinic** and **The Village for Families and Children** to see some of our contracted service providers in action. **Many Many Thanks** to our partners for providing a glimpse into the intentional collaboration we have on behalf of CT's kids and families.



Keep up the great work everyone!

DCF Staff Honored by Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence



October is Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Awareness Month. The intersection of IPV and child maltreatment is widely understood highlighting the need for collaboration across systems.

Department of Children and Families staff members Kris Robles, Alison Karimi and Dr. Polly Marston were honored this year by the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) at their 12th Annual *First 100 Plus Breakfast and Awards* ceremony.

In front of 400 people, they were acknowledged - along with other leaders across the state - for their efforts to improve outcomes for survivors and their children.

Each of these DCF leaders brings a unique perspective and passion for the work. Their messages also reflect the evolving way IPV is being responded to within our Agency.

IPV work within DCF is led by Behavioral Health Clinical Manager Kris Robles who oversees Substance Use, Intimate Partner Violence and Recovery Services. Kris joined the Department in 2014 as a Mental Health Consultant within the Regional Resource Group. He is quick to give praise to his staff and prefers to work "behind the scenes."

"I told them that honestly, I did not need to be recognized," Kris stated. Rather, the true staff who should be acknowledged are "the ones that are on the lines meeting with the providers, talking with the social workers," who have the toughest jobs.

Kris stresses the importance of looking beyond someone's behaviors while engaging with the individual expressing coercive behavior. "The theme that we continue to talk about, and I think as an agency we continue to see and hear from those with negative experience is that they want to be seen as a person, not by an incident that occurred," he stated.



"And when we can see them as people and talk to them as people and not talk at them as a case or a number or an incident, we have better engagement which will allow for them to be more engaged with us and continue to help them get the support that they need."

After acting as an IPV Specialist in the Hartford Office for over 9 years, Alison Karimi is now the Program Lead for IPV Services Statewide. On occasion, she may be referred to as the "OG" of the group as she was one of the original IPV Specialists in the state at one point covering the entire Region 4 and eventually only the Hartford Office. Her experiences within DCF are vast, starting her career over 23 years ago at the former Connecticut's Children's Place, now known as Solnit North, and as a Social Worker in the Regional Office.



"While I was extremely honored to receive the award from CCADV, it isn't just an award for me but it's an award for the entire Department because we don't do this work alone," Alison stated. "A big recognition on collaboration," is how she described the event. "I'm really proud of the work our agency has put into developing our workforce's knowledge and understanding of how to work with individuals who have been impacted by IPV. We have come a long way in our engagement process of all of

the family members", she stated, stressing everyone's safety and well-being within the family unit must be taken into consideration.

Dr. Polly Marsten described feeling "humbled" and "excited" to represent DCF while being honored by CCADV. "I cried during the whole thing. It was so touching to me." Dr. Marsten has been with DCF approximately 16 years with the last five of them as an IPVS in the Manchester Office. She was drawn to this work given it was her area of research while pursuing her Ph.D.

"All violence is my passion whether I work at Central Office or the Manchester Office," she stated. Dr. Marsten uses her research background to send out "research-based source documents, sources, tips how to engage using resourced gender specific research guided tactics" to the staff. A large emphasis is "how we speak and talk to people."

She refers to the DCF staff as "brilliant."

Dr. Marston points out that "everybody" who lives under the context of family violence is unsafe. "Literally everyone, including the person who is struggling with it," she stated. Her own research identified violence as form of "support seeking behavior" and because of the conditions created by "racism and sexism," often it is not properly addressed.

The Department's work has evolved regarding IPV, which includes the development of an advanced IPV practice series training offered to both DCF staff and community members. Alison stated in addition to the IPV trainings, routinely being offered by the Department, our agency could not be doing the great work that is being done to address IPV, without the IPV Specialists. IPV Specialists are located in each area office and are instrumental to CPS teams working with impacted families. "They work tirelessly to assist with ongoing safety planning and to find the most appropriate support services for each individual involved," she stated.



Engagement is a key component of successful interventions.

"Changing how we engage the individuals that are using violence, recognizing their strengths and that many of them have desire to want to change that behavior," is how Alison describes the approach. She cited an example of a man referred to the Department over 15 times and no one could ever meet with him. Learning he was incarcerated, she went to Hartford Correctional Facility with the Investigator. "I wanted to sit across the table from this individual," she stated.

They spoke for over two hours with Alison asking him if his youngest child could speak, how would he describe what he witnessed? "He would say I am a monster," the father replied. Alison then asked him how he would want to be described by his young child. "I want him to say I am his hero," was the response.

During the conversation they talked about services, obtained signed releases and set up a plan for when he would be released from prison. "Engagement goes a long way because at the end of the day, we haven't walked a day in any of their shoes and we can't pretend to know what their experiences have been. Our job is to engage, collaborate and support individuals to get to a place of wanting to change behavior," Alison stated.

"I think at the end of the day, I think people recognize we're here for the same vision and mission which is to help people," Kris stated.

Dr. Marson pointed out that how we speak and talk about all people is a major component of our work.

Alison has a quote on her wall from Marianne Etelman:

"Children don't come in pieces, they come from families and communities, so if you care about them, you have to care about all of them."

"I have it on my wall because it stuck with me, we are a child protection agency and we care very much about child safety, but we care about everyone. Those parents and those family members are just as important. Their safety and well-being are just as important," Alison stated.

Thank you, Kris, Alison and Dr. Marston for your leadership and congratulations on being honored by CCADV!

Maria Chose to Blossom



"I realized that my experiences could lead me in two different ways, either stuck within the trauma and allowing that trauma to dictate my life, or I could use my experiences as power, allowing me the grace to blossom."

Maria chose to blossom.

At 13 years of age, Maria couldn't have anticipated the life she now lives. Growing up in the foster care system exposed her to many challenges, including complexities, hardships, loss, systemic inequalities, and inconsistencies.

Maria experienced a disrupted adoption and underwent frequent changes in residence, transitioning from shelters to congregate care facilities, psychiatric hospitals, and foster homes. These continuous shifts introduced new faces, schools, and environments, all of which had a detrimental impact on her mental well-being, sense of security, self-esteem, and the quality of her education.

For a significant portion of her life, Maria grappled with the dehumanizing effects of systemic gaps, feeling like just another statistic in a system that made it difficult to discover her true individuality and purpose.

Maria vividly remembers the crucial moment she crossed paths with DCF Social Worker, Gina Cluff. She firmly believes that Gina, rather than adhering to what might have been perceived as conventional or routine, altered the course of her permanency plan - setting her on the path to healing.

Gina considers herself fortunate to have Maria in her life. "Maria has faced significant challenges throughout her youth, but she has dedicated time to self-improvement and healing. She has gained insights into how her circumstances have shaped her but never allows them to hold her back. Maria has used these experiences to mentally, spiritually, and emotionally enhance her personal growth. She is someone who can achieve remarkable things! Maria is truly an extraordinary individual with a promising future. I eagerly anticipate watching her continue to mature and see where life leads her. I am blessed to know Maria and have her in my life."



This was not the only adult who came into Maria's life to help shape her future.

While in high school, Maria required a respite foster care placement. She crossed paths with Pam DelCiampo, a licensed foster parent affiliated with Community Residence Inc. (CRI). Maria formed an immediate and strong connection with Pam and her extended family.

Pam firmly believes that life has no room for coincidences as she reflected on how Maria came into her home. As Pam was getting ready to host a party for more than 100 guests, she received a call from CRI, asking if she could provide care for a young girl. Despite the day's chaos, Pam felt an undeniable pull to say yes. She describes how an immediate bond formed between Maria and her family, and she now regards Maria as an integral part of her family.

Pam took an active role in Maria's life, accompanying her on college tours, participating in her high school and college graduation ceremonies, and maintaining their connection for various holidays and celebrations.

"Maria is committed to advocating for children in her foster situation through her future career goals. She is selfless and caring about others. She makes a point of coming over when she knows my grandchildren are here. They love her as much as she loves them. My wish for Maria's future is that she can make the impact on others that she envisions. She has the exponential ability to make that happen. All this from a small child who was moved from place to place and given a bad deal, but somehow made it all happen. She truly is a blessing," Pam stated.

Despite frequent moves and challenges, Maria set a goal to attend college. At the end of her junior year in high school, Maria discovered UConn Rising Scholars (URS), formerly known as UConn First Star Academy, an immensely beneficial and life-altering opportunity. This dynamic four-week program offered her a taste of the post-secondary educational environment and the chance to earn college credits. Through this experience, she received a top-notch education, engaged in intellectually stimulating classes, and connected with influential mentors.

Maria found hope that she could attend a four-year university like the University of Connecticut.

UConn Rising Scholars transformed Maria's life, instilling the confidence, connections, and practical academic skills she needed to excel. This program contributed to her growth in the past, and she continues to thrive thanks to its dedicated staff and the opportunities it provided.

Following participation in Rising Scholars, Maria was recommended to join Student Support Services (SSS), a similarly designed summer program geared toward UConn freshmen, ensuring their enrollment into UConn. The SSS program was invaluable for this first-generation Latinx woman in foster care during her first year in college. It offered her a diverse community and similar benefits to URS, providing a solid foundation of support for her initial year.

During her time in college, Maria met Alex Katz, the URS Program Coordinator at the time, who went on to create a program called Creating Caring Communities (CCC). Alex and Maria had a lot in common as

Alex created CCC at the same time she herself was an undergraduate student at UConn, facing homelessness and family estrangement. This newly formed group consisted of students with firsthand experiences in their pursuit of resources despite facing resistance from the school. It provided one-on-one mentorship to each youth, equipping them with necessary skills and knowledge.

Alex's guidance paved the way for Maria to emulate her leadership, support students grappling with similar difficulties, and initiate the process of dismantling institutional obstacles. Like Gina Cluff, Alex consistently stood up for Maria and was there when she needed support the most.

Over time, Alex observed Maria's remarkable journey as she consistently pursued and accomplished numerous goals, surmounted various challenges, and actively sought opportunities to assist others. "I am consistently impressed by Maria's heart, drive, dedication, resilience, and compassion. She is always finding ways to advocate for others and to create a safe and trauma-informed space for them to develop a more empowered sense of self. Maria is such a force for good in the world, and I am honored to be a part of her journey," Alex stated.

Maria has equal admiration for Alex. "Her firsthand experiences have enabled her to relate to me in a way no one else can, as she genuinely comprehends the full breadth of my struggles," she stated.

Maria eventually served as President of Creating Caring Communities. While Maria acknowledges her hard work and determination in reaching her position, she emphasizes that these programs opened the door for her, equipped her with the necessary tools, and offered ongoing support and mentorship. Thanks to these programs and her support network, she has been able to transcend her circumstances and is dedicated to helping other students facing similar challenges.



Maria graduated from UConn with a 3.8 GPA and is presently engaged in her graduate studies at the University where she is actively working toward an advanced degree in Public Policy, explicitly focusing on Child Welfare Law and Equity. She is advancing her knowledge as a Fellow with the CT Office of the Child Advocate and is working for the Commission of Women, Children, Seniors Equity and Opportunities (CWCSEO).

While her future career path may still be uncertain, Maria relentlessly desires to gain comprehensive knowledge in various facets of public policy.

She also has aspirations of potentially attending law school in the future.

Maria was selected as a member of the 2023 Cohort of Jim Casey Fellows by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Over the upcoming year, Maria will collaborate with a diverse group of young individuals with personal experiences from various parts of the country. Together, they will lead initiatives aimed at enhancing policies in the child welfare sector.

While acknowledging that there are persisting gaps and systemic problems within the child welfare system, Maria remains hopeful about ongoing improvements, inspired by the significant transformation that the Department of Children and Families (DCF) has undergone since she entered fourteen years ago.

Maria's most valuable piece of advice for youth who have experience in the foster care system is clear. "It's essential to recognize that you have the right to embrace your humanity, expect to be treated with kindness and respect, and pursue healing, regardless of where you are in your personal journey. The frequent penalties that young people in foster care often face due to past traumas have contributed to a narrative that labels them problematic, challenging, or abnormal children," Maria stated.



Nevertheless, Maria encourages youth to find strength in understanding that it's perfectly acceptable to react to difficult situations with emotions like hurt, anger, fear, sadness, and grief. In essence, it's okay to be vulnerable, she explained.

"Remember, you have the permission to be imperfect, and you should assert that humane treatment and the opportunity for healing are your unconditional birthright. You are always worthy and deserving of it," she stated.

Maria's advice underscores the importance of recognizing one's intrinsic worth, embracing vulnerability, and demanding humane treatment and healing as fundamental rights, regardless of past experiences or challenges. She encourages individuals to break free from the stigmatizing narrative surrounding them, emphasizing that they deserve kindness, respect, and the opportunity for personal growth and healing.

Thank you, Maria, for sharing your story and all you have taught us!

"We did what anyone would have done in that situation."



For the 9 young campers and 3 Expedition Instructors on the last leg of their DCF Wilderness School expedition, what started out as a routine activity-packed day took a scary turn after the group bedded down for the night.

Earlier that day, the youth went rock climbing and participated in a 12-mile paddle which first-year Expedition Instructor Eric Carlson said they "crushed".

"Before everything unfolded, the trip was going stupendous. We had a twelve-mile paddle day which is very impressive for a group of 12- and 13-year-olds. We did some rock climbing which was amazing. The camaraderie between everybody was great. Honestly, it was one of the best days of my life," said Carlson.

Tired and content with the day, Carlson decided to set up a hammock, climbed in and fell into a deep slumber. He awoke when he felt something jostle the hammock.



Initially, he thought it was fellow instructor Allaith Ghaibah playing a prank on him. Carlson then heard a growl, felt a scratch, and fell to the ground disoriented and that is when he felt an animal biting at his leg. In fact, it was a rabid bobcat which the three instructors described as so big that it resembled a medium sized dog.

After Carlson fought the animal off, he went to the tent of Lead Expedition Instructor El Stumph to notify her of what happened. As the lead instructor on the trip and, upon first seeing Carlson's leg injury, Stumph took immediate action to call into base camp and get Carlson evacuated and treated for the animal bite.



Before she could make that call the bobcat returned to the campsite a second time in an even more aggressive state. The instructors' attempts to follow protocol and seek medical help for Carlson continued to be interrupted by what Stumph described as a "series of attacks."

Over the course of 30 minutes, the instructors fought off the bobcat in three separate attacks. The second and third encounter were as terrifying as the first as the animal began charging the three instructors huddled in Stumph's tent.

"While we were on one of the calls [to seek help] we were attacked, and we were able to fight it off for a little bit then it came back one more time. I can't even say it was scary - we didn't really have time to be scared and we had to act," said Ghaibah.

The safety of the young campers remained top of mind. At one point, a camper had wandered out of her tent sleepy and confused. Ghaibah then guided the camper back to her tent and told the others to stay inside.

Ghaibah remembered, "Even with all of that happening it was the clearest I was ever able to think."

As the adrenaline flowed, the instructors said their instincts kicked in and they worked as a team to eventually subdue the animal during the third and final attack.

Asked how they were able to overtake the animal and, somewhat incredibly, protect all nine campers in their care from physical harm, the instructors credit the trust they have in each other. They agreed they were just "on the same page".



When asked if they considered themselves heroes for their brave act, the instructors said they did what anyone would have done in that situation.

Stumph explained, "It was definitely very scary but Allaith, Eric and I responded together as a team as best we could. We did what we had to do to keep each other and the students safe. We were just acting on instinct."

'All those little reference points built on expedition stay with them for life.'



DCF's Wilderness School offers high-impact, year-round outdoor excursion activities ranging in length from 1-day to 20-Day programs for young people ages 13-21 looking to make positive changes. While working and living together, youth build life skills and confront course activities along with weather and other environmental challenges.

One of only a few state-administered programs of its kind in the country, the Wilderness School this year celebrated 50 years in existence at a recent ceremony during which Stumph, Ghaibah and Carlson were recognized for their actions.

While slightly more than half of the youth going on expeditions are referred to DCF for prevention, intervention, and transition supports, the Wilderness School is a place for all young

people in Connecticut to try something new, find and develop their strengths, and build elemental skills that will help them in their lives.

The latter was true of the excursion led by Stumph, Ghaibah and Carlson. That particular group was made up of youth who were classmates, residents of the same shoreline town and participating through their local Youth Service Bureau as part of a positive development program.

One of those youths, 13-year-old Rae said the expedition was really fun but, prior to setting off on the journey, she didn't know anyone, not even the instructors. She said within a couple of days, however, all of the campers were experiencing and pushing through the same challenges making it easier to empathize and bond with each other.

"At first I was really scared to be away from my family and with new people. But after the first day I was really relaxed because of how amazing the instructors are and how easy they are to talk to."

"There's not a lot of adults in my life like that," she said.

The program's instructors take pride in being good role models, helping youth come out of their shells, and imparting life skills such as healthy conflict resolution and respectfully talking through interpersonal issues that arise on the expeditions.

Another camper, a recent Wilderness School graduate who was referred for intervention support, said that before the program he was getting into a lot of trouble at school. He attributes his nearly weeklong expedition with turning his life around.



Similar to Rae, he said of that experience that he was feeling a lot of apprehension but that shifted into a deep appreciation for his instructors and fellow campers as they ventured further into the outdoors bonding and challenging themselves and each other.

Instructor Ghaibah said that is one of the best parts of the job. "At first, they're all reserved and quiet because they don't know anybody. Then you take them out to the field, and they open up and their personalities come out. They always end up making close friends and staying in touch with them."

After what happened with the bobcat on her first trip, would Rae recommend other kids come out on expedition? "Considering all the good parts", Rae said she would because the instructors made such a big impact and, all things considered, the experience was so memorable.

"It was a really rare thing that happened. [That night] may have been a worse experience if we had different instructors. It was really hard to see such important people [to me] injured. They were talking to us the whole time telling us to stay calm."



Rae is now preparing for a follow-up expedition, a 14-day excursion in the Adirondacks, and said of the friendships and connections she took away from that first expedition, "Since we live in the same town, we hangout all the time. On the expedition, we had a lot of time to talk to each other. We became really close. "

Stumph, Ghaibah and Carlson said it is gratifying to have youth who they took on expedition come to visit and tell them about the times they cherished or used strategies to overcome personal roadblocks or doubted their abilities but then believed in themselves. Seeing that process play out is what makes the Wilderness School so important to both the instructors and youth.

Lead Wilderness Instructor El Stumph, who has been with the program for several years, said, "We try to set a positive reference point for the youth on our expeditions and give them a series of moments in which they were able to push further, try something new, overcome challenges, repair relationships in their crew, or really just be cared for."



"All those little reference points built on expedition stay with them for life and they take those back to their schools and their communities."

Instructor Carlson shared that his own mother was in foster care which is what gave him the passion to work with kids to make sure they are supported and safe.

"I think sometimes when you come from a diverse background it can be difficult growing up and when you leave that behind it allows you to explore meeting new people and explore introspection which is really valuable," he said.



"It's kind of like a metaphor: when you go outside, you're able to go 'inside' and look within and learn about yourself when maybe our youth aren't able to do at home."

The instructors' act of bravery in the face of such an unexpected and dangerous situation demonstrates the commitment to the young people they work with and the Wilderness School's mission of serving youth of all backgrounds.

Aaron Wiebe, Director of the Wilderness School, is proud of his staff and graduates. "It takes courage and willingness to try. Once our youth take that first step then amazing discoveries are made."

Of his instructors, "It takes a tremendous amount of dedication to walk side-by-side with their crew on expedition and role model what's possible on an experiential level. They're all in it together. The trust and bonds built between staff and students are part of the healing and growth the youth bring home with them."

Happy 50th Anniversary Wilderness School - "Transformation happens here"



"This is our hidden gem," stated Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes during the weekend long ceremony celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness School!

Founded in 1974, the program model is rooted in positive youth development. The base camp is a beautiful property in East Hartland surrounded by trees, trails and the calm of the outdoors.

"The Wilderness School has become a place of solace and healing, and I could not be more proud to have this as part of our toolbox in the children's behavioral health continuum," the Commissioner further stated.

Youth come to the program from across Connecticut and include adolescents known to the Department but far more who reside in their own homes and wish to learn additional skills to make changes in their life. Studies have documented the Wilderness School's positive impact upon self-esteem, self-control, and interpersonal skill enhancement of those attending.

Most importantly, the youth learn about themselves and overcoming personal challenges.

Aaron Wiebe is the Director. "You cannot have a director that is more compassionate, more thoughtful, more calm," according to the Commissioner.

"The learning that takes place on the course can be a metaphor for other situations," stated Aaron. "Often we're working with young people who come from situations that are defeating." Through the outdoor experiences and relationships with staff, they feel "empowered."

Programs range from one-day to 20-day excursions as youth partake in backpacking, rock climbing, ropes challenge courses, canoeing, and other physical activities including team building exercises. The program course area follows the Appalachian Trail corridor of the Taconic and Berkshire Mountain ranges of Connecticut and Massachusetts.



Alex took part in a 5-day program at 13 years of age which he described as "fun and very challenging" despite really wanting to be out for 20 days. "I definitely learned that you are able to learn leadership in even like the smallest situations," he stated. "Patience" is also something he took away from his experiences which have now included participating in annual excursions including - a 20-day hike!

"Every experience is different of course," Andrys stated. "Being a city boy from Hartford, being outdoors is kinda like, it's very rare." He was exposed to an occasional fishing trip, but nothing like what the excursions had to offer. He offered insights on what it is like to be away from social media, the internet, cell phones and simply experience the outdoors. "You have no other choice but to be your raw self. And as hard as it is for you to get used to it, it allows you to look deep inside yourself and learn about who you are."

"The outdoors is the land of opportunity and I think the Wilderness School is a great foundation for that."

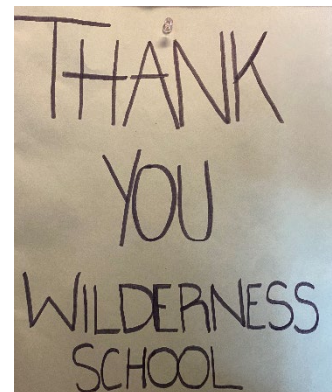


Nikita was exposed to the program back in 2019 and "loved it ever since." His initial 5-day hike was difficult. "I learned that I can do a lot more than I think I can," he stated. "A lot more." It was completing tasks that he was uncomfortable with that in the end, taught him the most about himself. For other youth he would tell them to "definitely try it out" and that "you're not going to know until you go." Maybe the most important message an adolescent wants to know - "They have a lot of good food."

Gabe Oliva is a Lead Expedition Instructor and has been with the school since 2019. He is now giving back to youth - which he has had similar experiences. At 17 years of age, Gabe made some "poor choices" and was placed into a 28-day program adventure. "After that, I dedicated my life to being an outdoor leader," he stated given that program changed his life. "I love coming to work here. I really do."

"I like this place, I like coming back here because I feel like it has all my skills in one place," stated Mira Siewert. "It's not every day you get to work with kids who have so much life and energy. It's superfun." The youth have overcome so much adversity and some youth "grow up" right on the course. Their changes motivate her to become a better person. "There is a lot of emotion behind this place," she added.

Aaron "speaks from the heart" when describing the Wilderness School, the staff and the youth who attend. While the program does outdoor activities, deep into the Northeastern trials, he explains his perspective on why the program is successful.



"What we do is important, but that's not necessarily I believe from where the magic comes from," he stated. "There's a place where the magic comes from, and it actually has to do with the words right behind me. It's this willingness to try, it's this willingness to step forward to do something different, to do something new and in doing so, you may confront new information," he stated. This is where you learn about yourself and your capabilities he explained.

Youth who attend the program may have had adverse childhoods and are facing huge obstacles in their future. "When they make that decision to try, something else can happen and all of a sudden those defeating stories start to get re-written," he stated.

"I believe our staff are above and beyond the most supportive staff you can possibly want."

The camp's logo is a butterfly - reflective of the changes that occur.

"It's more than camping," stated Commissioner Dorantes.

"Transformation happens here."