

"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."