

## Into the Woods: DCF Program Preparing Youth for Life Beyond the Wilderness



Gabe Oliva Rapoport is a DCF Wilderness School Instructor who has co-lead an impressive 20 expeditions, including three extensive 20-day trips and four 14-day trips. His dedication to outdoor education and youth development is apparent to everyone who knows him. Colleagues and students alike regard him as a role model, highlighting his passion and ability to motivate others to push their limits.

His own transformative journey began at seventeen when he participated in a diversionary Outward Bound program not affiliated with the Wilderness School. Initially hesitant about spending weeks in nature, he found his stride and was inspired by one particular instructor who he looked to as a role model. Gabe's curiosity about turning this fledgling passion into a career sparked from a conversation he had with that instructor and realized this could be an actual job prospect.

"It was 28 days and I was not excited at all but actually ended up liking it a lot. I remember asking one of my instructors, 'this is a job, you get paid to do this?' At the time I didn't see any normal job that was exciting or interesting to me. But I thought 'this is cool, I would do this as a job,'" Gabe remembered.

Over the years, Gabe prepared for his current role by undertaking solo trips and attending an Outdoor Leadership program at Greenfield Community College in 2018. It was during a jobs fair at this program that he met Aaron Wiebe, the Wilderness School director. The program's philosophy aligned perfectly with Gabe's own beliefs as an outdoor instructor, emphasizing positive youth development—a concept that deeply resonates with him. That is encapsulated in a philosophy, or mantra, often echoed by Wiebe and his team.

"This isn't about quote en quote 'fixing young people' which is one of the misguided things people assume when they picture programs like this. Actually it's about giving young people tools and helping them draw on the tools they already have to be successful and empowered."

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. That is what Gabe likes so much about it - the accessibility for everyone to explore new experiences in a welcoming, supportive environment.

"I got to know the program and it seemed like a really good fit. I loved that it was a really accessible experience which was rare for a program like this. Somewhere students could come, don't have to pay money and we outfit them. I felt passionate about working for a program that was that available to all young people and families."

Gabe also values the collaborative spirit at the Wilderness School. The strong sense of community not only enhances the experience for the staff but also for the youth they serve, making the Wilderness School a truly special place for growth and connection.

The leadership and his fellow instructors are people he wants to be around and who he enjoys working with, "The team here is what sets this place apart for me."



"When you spend 20 days with a person you get to know them really well. Also, being outside renders everyone vulnerable and not distracted by technology everyone is in a state of being really connected to the people around you. I find myself bonding with my students and co-workers in this really unique way."

The DCF Wilderness School stands out as one of the few state-administered programs of its kind in the country, providing impactful, year-round outdoor excursions for young people aged 13 to 21. With programs ranging from 1-day to 20-day experiences, the immersive experience encourages personal growth, resilience, and teamwork, equipping participants with tools they can apply to their everyday lives.

When he started at the Wilderness School, Gabe said he had a good grasp on the technical aspect of the job - the "hard skills" so to speak like tying a knot or paddling a canoe. He remembers an onboarding that focused on the "soft skills", such as conflict resolution.



"This job opens a whole new world into what we call soft skills. Interpersonal skills, communications, de-escalation, intervention and just understanding that youth behavior is all about meeting needs. Learning what's at the root of it, why are they acting this way? That's been the biggest difference from my first expedition compared to more recent ones - it's my ability to better communicate not just with students but with coworkers as well."

Gabe's love for the outdoors and his desire to support young people in their own journeys make a lasting impact on all who have the opportunity to go out on an expedition with him. Fifteen-year-old Alex participated in three Wilderness School expeditions, two led by Gabe and a third led by a trio of other instructors, said he had been on hikes but had "never really been in the woods."

Alex ended up enjoying the experience so much that he came back the next year. During the second expedition, a fourteen-day trip to Maine, he said he and his peers learned a lot about

themselves through each other. Alex remembers pushing his own limits beyond what he was capable of achieving.

On his third expedition, the most recent trip led by Gabe, Alex remembers fondly but it started out a little rocky. On that expedition, a longer 20-day trip, he said he was a little nervous and remembers it being loud. The first night he barely slept at all. The next morning, Gabe could see in Alex's eyes that something was wrong and offered him some words of comfort. Things started to turn around from that point.

"It was just a great trip. We spent the entire time having really well thought out conversations about ourselves, things we do in life, what we feel we can better and what we do well."



During a group activity called shout out to the stars, the youth engaged in some personal reflection. They were asked who, right now, would you want to know that you are on this expedition? What person had a profound impact on your life, and who you want to thank for getting you this far in the expedition?

"There was a few of us who thought deeply about it. Some said it was this teacher or that person. Gabe told us, for him, it was his expedition leader when he went on that [Outward Bound program] when he was seventeen."

Alex said that spoke volumes to him and the other youth. The fact that Gabe opened up to them like and showed some vulnerability.

"It showed us that experience got him to where he was. It was like us seeing Gabe's own role model made us think more of him. That was a lot of respect [for Gabe to share that] with us."

Asked his impression of Gabe following those two expeditions, Alex said, "I think he's an amazing role model in the sense that he's experienced a lot of things we're experiencing. He's taken that and made such a positive life out of it. It showed us that you can make the best of your situation and become a great person."



Alex also said that expedition taught him a lot about himself and his capacity as a human being.

"[On the expeditions], I realized your body will not fail you if you keep pushing. Your limits as a human being are really high and Gabe inspired us to keep going, move forward. And we did it."

Alex said he has taken those life lessons and applied it to his school life where he is attending a private secondary school on scholarship and taking all AP courses. He said it is hard, it feels like being in college, but those expeditions

with Gabe taught him to find joy in moments that were completely uncomfortable. The reward is coming out on the other side a stronger person.

Seeing youth, over the course of an expedition, discover their strengths, embrace challenges and realize their potential is what it is all about for Gabe. Helping to facilitate their confidence and the "soft skills" they take with them beyond "the wilderness."

Gabe admits the job has its challenges too, "Sometimes being an instructor is hard. It's not an easy job but I wouldn't want to do anything else."

Although Gabe has also grown a lot from his first days as an outdoor instructor, he said one thing has remained a constant.

"What's been consistent is that I've been so lucky to be able to share some real special moments with my crews - seeing the kids grow and flourish and experience new things is special. It's been really amazing to see students come so far.

"They come back, get older, get wiser, they're like completely different people. That's probably one of my favorite things."

