

"You belong among wildflowers."



"You belong among wildflowers," - lyrics sung by Tom Petty - are tattooed on the right hand of Erin Laffond.

Wildflowers... grown together in fields and meadows.... blend individual colors into a beautiful mosaic. A perfect analogy for the experiences of youth at the DCF Wilderness School and the passion of a genuine and authentic team member.

Erin is completing her third Spring to Fall season at the Wilderness School - a prevention, intervention, and transition program for adolescents offering activities ranging from 1-day hikes to 20-day expeditions.

While attending community college in Massachusetts, her Professor for Outdoor Education was familiar with the program and suggested she apply.

"When I graduated, he gave me kind of a confidence boost to apply here and see what happens," Erin stated.

That conversation changed her life and now she is changing the lives of others.

"This has been a consistency the past three years which is great. I love this life," Erin stated.

Erin's devotion to the youth she leads hiking, rock climbing, canoeing and through other experiences is evident.

She wants the best for them.

Their time together symbolizes much more than just carrying heavy backpacks, building campfires, sleeping in a tent or wet boots.

Without the distraction of cell phones, each minute, hour, day and week the staff and youth are together they emphasize team building, peer relations, relying on oneself, personal responsibility and conflict resolution.

"We're asking the students to work on a lot of things," Erin stated.

They grow together. Youth find untapped strengths and create lifelong connections.

At a recent graduation, Erin spoke to the adolescent females she led on a 20-day expedition along with two colleagues. Families, DCF staff and others listened as Erin described the individual growth she observed for each member and her desires for their future.

The wildflower embodies the symbolism of unity. Erin and others saw the unity among youth and staff. Once unfamiliar with one another, they became a supportive team. A beautiful mosaic themselves.



"I really value this time where I can talk about them and have them shine and also reflect on all the parts of them that I've gotten to see, and I want them to feel empowered by all of that," Erin stated.

Erin wanted to create a space so they could hear her words about them.

"I hope for everything for them. I hope they can step away from this and find the world and the life that was familiar and is familiar to them and how to make that have more elements that are healthy and put into practice that maybe they can't quite connect right now to this experience, but they will feel that. They will feel those things, that sense of accomplishment, a sense of challenge, a sense of anything," she recalled while reflecting on her wishes.



Working with today's youth - especially adolescents you have never encountered only to soon leave with them on a 5, 15 or 20-day expedition - requires unique skill and patience.

In preparation, Erin goes on a long run to "get my heavy breaths out so when I am on course it just feels a little bit more grounded."

She wants to create a "holding space" for them. "I really enjoy that. Letting the students come to me. Letting that process happen. I don't want to rush them. I let them talk to me. It's their process and their experience," Erin added.

This is not an easy task given the speed at which today's world moves, the pressures on adolescents and distractions.

What was her most memorable moment at the Wilderness School?

Erin recalls a particularly difficult day with a youth whom she was working with 1:1 as they were separated from the other group members. "I was navigating some different things that were happening with this student," she stated.

As they were just trying to get through a tough moment, they both became physically and emotionally exhausted and sat down on the side of the road.

No one talked at first. Be present, give space is what Erin thought. Give it time.

"It wasn't even really about addressing what was happening it was just addressing that like we're here for each other," Erin stated.

"As much as maybe the student didn't want me in that moment, their actions were saying I don't want to be alone."

They grounded each other.

"To be able to be that person and to be there for them and also to reciprocate that you can also be here for me because I'm scared and I'm sad and being able to talk about that was just very real and something I took away from this course," Erin thought.



"I'm a human being and this student is also another human being, and we are existing in this moment."



"We had a hug. We leaned on each other for a bit and then things started coming up just naturally as they would and just letting that time sit with each other and then coming together was super helpful," Erin recalled.

Her actions have not gone unnoticed.

"Erin has a deep commitment to supporting students in their journey toward their own sense of belonging and wellness. She has a quietude of presence as she holds space and patience for the youth in her care. Erin's calm demeanor gives youth the time and pause they need to both regulate themselves and move forward toward their own goals. Her strength is in her ability to speak just the right number of words at the exactly right time for youth to feel seen, held and challenged," stated Erin's seasonal colleague

and course director, Kris Salisbury.

"Quiet and soft spoken" were words once attached to Erin. Later in life, it was later reframed for her that these traits were not something she needed to work on or address.

Erin discovered being observant and quiet is a strength. That it is okay to be physically present even if you don't have words to say.

"I'm going to show up here and I may not have a lot to say but like my body simply being here is a lot. I would love to teach that just through modeling that because it is modeling for myself and telling myself every day that I am here, and I am showing up and that's an amazing thing. And to not be told that I have to change that, or that I have to be louder or that I have to find words to express what I've feeling."

Her message for the youth? "I'm just asking you to breathe and be you."

She wants the families of the youth served to know the Wilderness School is a community. "I hope they can feel the trust, they can feel the loyalty, they can feel the support that just lives here among all of these people that they have to return to and to send their youth to."

"I would want them to know there's a lot of care coming from here."

"Erin works with a depth of intent and skills that have been practiced and meditated upon. When working and interacting with Erin, it is easy to feel that 'still waters run deep'. She is easy to trust and collaborate with because she works with honesty and integrity. Wilderness School benefits greatly from the way she embodies our value of honoring each person and their unique strengths and experiences," stated Wilderness School Director Aaron Wiebe.

What is Erin's motivation? Her "why" she does this work?



"There's a lot of different people in our lives when we grow up and sometimes you know, they don't turn out the way we want them to and so we find that relationship and love with other things in our life and the way that we cope with that," Erin responded.



Erin experienced some of those same issues personally and what she found at the Wilderness School - and through the youth - is that place of comfort and belonging.

"I want these students to know they have familiarity and predictability with the people here," she stated.

"Just being the support that I know I would have wanted, and still want."

"Anything that I can do to just make a little bit of a spark happen, to assist students to believe there is a chance they can have somebody in their life who will give them a particular feeling or feel joy," she further added. "It means the world to me to show the students a little glimpse of that," she added.

"That's all I ever wanted."

In many cultures, the wildflowers are seen as symbols of hope, wishes and new beginnings.

When Erin looks at the word of her tattoo, a message is present to herself that "I exist in a world that was meant for me and getting to a place of simplicity and beauty can be found in myself, as well as the blanket of people and places that exist around me."

For Erin Laffond, belonging among the wildflowers is her calling as she empowers others to form that beautiful mosaic.