



## What I Learned in the Desert

by Kathryn Jessup ('95)

As some of you know, I stay close to The Urban School. In 2011, I married my “latter day” high school sweetheart, fellow alum of the class of 1995, Igor Zagatsky. Igor has stayed even closer to Urban: he has worked there for 13 years in the IT department. When Igor and I started dating, he explained that every spring he went to Joshua Tree National Park with Urban’s junior class as a staff chaperone. I couldn’t join him right away, but I noticed that he came back filthy, unshaven, and happy beyond words.

I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with camping, but Igor’s enthusiasm for the Joshua Tree trip was infectious and this year I decided to enter the fray as a volunteer chaperone. I’m so glad I did. That’s not to say that the love-hate didn’t continue: having to back up for a start and bundle up, sneakers and all, in order to traipse through the dawn to an unflushing toilet when one merely needs to pee was rough, but watching the sun rise on a 100-million year old rockscape once populated by the Pinto, Serrano, Chemehuevi and Cahuilla people was more than enough reward. Rewarding too was witnessing the respectful and peaceful, yet joyful, culture that The Urban School group created in the present day.

The group size was on the higher end of manageable with about 70 students, but I can see how Urban’s leadership has improved its approach to these trips: where once faculty would have been on their own to manage trip logistics and programming, they are now reinforced by a small crew of trained



naturalists, rock climbers, and wilderness guides led by staff trips director Rachel Fristedt. Although we could have used a few more crew members, the basic model worked and allowed faculty advisors to focus on the team-building and emotional development of their students while the crew took care of supplies, kitchen management, and all the technical aspects of the wilderness activities such as rock climbing and scrambling (hiking up and down mountains of rocks). We all, students and faculty alike, had clean-up and prep shifts in the kitchen to be sure, but the organization was there.

Service learning remains a key component of Urban’s outdoor trips and this year the junior class got to participate in a unique activity that grabbed headlines and airwaves statewide: our students helped to remove graffiti from rock walls in the park. It is incredibly sad that people would mar with spray paint



such an ancient, sacred space, home to the some of the most rare geologic features in the world and a sanctuary for desert bighorn sheep, but, as we learned from our naturalists, the human urge to mark rocks goes back thousands of years: Native American tribes left petroglyphs in the park that are still visible to this day, but you have to know which ones you're seeing because in the 1960s movie makers from Hollywood came to Joshua Tree and added a few faux petroglyphs of their own. Learning all of this sparked an interesting discussion of human impact on the park and how context and intention shape our view of

what is considered expression vs. defacement.

Overall, I was struck with what a special opportunity Urban was providing each and every one of these students. The school teaches them specialized skills. They learned all of the safety calls and techniques needed to climb a rock on a rope or "belay," meaning to manage the rope from beneath. Each advising group went on a daylong hike that involved many hours of scrambling. It was a challenging adventure and at times I wondered at Urban's daring, but in the end we accomplished something together, something difficult and real.



Each student had to confront her individual ability level in the face of the task and each student was called upon to help others through the process. We "spotted" one another as we scrambled up huge boulders and occasionally one of us needed to be caught. We hoisted, pushed, pulled, shimmied, and "chimneyed" through intricate rock structures that sometimes provided shade and comfort and other times skinned our knees and hands. We problem solved on our own and together. "What's the best way for me to tackle this rock?" "How do I help you off?" Sometimes we used words and sometimes it was wordless.

Our guide provided a sugary snack (one of very few commercial food exposures on the trip) and jokes and good humor were abundant, but there was no taking the gravity out of the day, both literally and metaphorically. I saw how the hike, and the trip in general, provided an excellent metaphor for the senior year these youngsters will face next fall and for their lives beyond Urban. The mountain will be the mountain and you will be you with your strengths and weaknesses, but the important thing is to notice, without judgment, what those are strengths and weaknesses are, and to help others where you can and be helped when you need to be. We all made it back to base camp stronger, and with a deep affection and appreciation for each other. We wouldn't have, or couldn't have, done it alone.



The last night of the trip, faculty members Wendy Parkman and Tomás Jacquez held a council circle in which we all shared some reflections in confidence with each other. I was so impressed with the students and so glad that Urban has remained committed to outdoor learning.

The circle of Urban Community is one that will embrace these children, and bless them with the value of collective learning, their whole lives through. I know, because I find myself blessed by

that embrace 22 years after my journey with The Urban School began.