

“You’re crazy! You have a cozy bed at home, but you want to leave the safety and comfort of home for a wilderness expedition? You have to carry the weight of your necessities on your back? You’re too small for that! You’re going to be eaten by a bear!”

These were the many thoughts and doubts that my parents expressed when I told them about my upcoming adventure in the wilderness. It wasn’t in their culture to go camping or seeking out the wilderness, so their hesitation was not surprising. This exciting and nerve-racking opportunity came about because Big City Mountaineers (BCM) reached out to my youth agency, East Bay Asian Youth Center. When the offer to go backpacking in Yosemite was extended to me, I excitedly joined without any hesitation. After many meetings with BCM representatives, who displayed professionalism, compassion and trust, my parents felt at ease letting me go on this expedition.



AMY TAM

There were a total of eight of us on our trip: four youths and four adults. BCM is unlike any other organization due to its one-to-one mentor to mentee ratio. I remember feeling afraid thinking about whether I would have a good trip or if I'd feel secluded. But the fear of not belonging faded as we packed away our phones, and began to settle into our adventure.

I remember putting on my 40-50lb backpack and taking the first few steps doubting whether I could actually do this. Being a petite female, I'm 4'11", it felt empowering to be able to carry all the weight I needed for the duration of the trip on my back. But I wasn't the only one who felt the challenge, my peers did as well. Hiking up steep terrain to reach a 10,000ft elevation was challenging for all of us. As the scout of the day, I was leading the group along the trail, responsible for making sure the group stayed together. Being in that position made me aware of not just my own pacing, but aware of the pacing of everyone in the group, so we could stick together as a team. After a long day of hiking, we finally reached the lake that signaled the close proximity of our campsite. As I reached the edge of the lake, I yelled out "I'm so happy!" I couldn't contain the joy I felt upon completing this difficult journey.



BACKPACKING WITH BCM

One of the biggest takeaways from spending time with the BCM mentors was how many of them managed to have outdoor hobbies despite their chosen career path. I learned that one mentor was a middle school math teacher and another had a career in videography and media editing. It was interesting to me that our mentors had such different lives, but they were passionate about working with youths and mentoring in the outdoors. I realized then that no matter which career path I took, I wanted to devote part of my time to mentoring youths in the wilderness. I wanted to support them in their experience outdoors and hopefully inspire them in the same way that the BCM mentors helped me.

By the end of the trip, I felt like all the perceived physical limitations of what I was capable and not capable of diminished. I realized then, that I could achieve anything I wanted to, as long as I put my mind into it, with the notion of “one foot at a time.” I felt a huge sense of belonging in the wilderness as well as a feeling of responsibility to be a steward of it.

A year after my backpacking experience, I heard about another program BCM offered, the Outdoor Educators Institute (OEI). This is when I realized I could truly pursue a career in the outdoors. OEI was an intensive, 10-week training course that offered technical guiding skills. It trained us to be multi-culturally competent leaders and stewards of outdoor education. If not for BCM and OEI, I would not have had the skills and necessary connections to continue the pursuit of outdoor education and adventure experience.



AMY BACKPACKS MT. WHITNEY ON A TRIP TO SUPPORT BCM

From BCM’s teen mentorship backpacking expedition, to my time at Outdoor Educators Institute, BCM has changed my life and provided me opportunities I would not have experienced otherwise. Because of my depth of experience with BCM programs, I was nominated to join the Board of Directors. Now, I am learning the skills and seeing the commitment that this working board and staff bring to their work serving youth.

Before BCM, I had never seen what the wilderness and outdoors had to offer. I had no idea it could become the focus for my career. But through continual support from BCM’s programs, I realized it

was possible as long as I pursued it. Now I am studying Environmental Studies in the University of California, Santa Barbara, to incorporate the knowledge I have gained through environmental education in order to share my love and knowledge of the outdoors with underserved youths. BCM has instilled critical life skills for me, supported me through my challenges, helped build my confidence and has taught me to be a leader. My goal is to continue to serve as an alumna, as a board member, and as a future volunteer with BCM.