

Tolerance for adversity and uncertainty was the line I kept hearing from one of the instructors. Though I knew what it meant, I did not truly understand it until I faced some of the most challenging and frightening obstacles of my life: walking across thin snow patches, sliding down a steep slope of snow, crossing a strong current river at night, crying from exhaustion and ascending/descending a peak.

I am here, so proud to say that I successfully completed a 30-day backpacking expedition with 8 other students and 2 instructors. We entered and hiked East through North Cascades National Park and into Pasayten Wilderness. We finished 133 miles, 29,570 feet of elevation gain, hiked through different terrains including snow, rocks, meadows, forests, and off trails. Sunshine, rain, snow, wildflowers, and beautiful sceneries were abundant.

In there, I got to learn about environment studies, wilderness first aids, outdoor living skills and leadership techniques. Everyday was filled with plenty of laughter and unforgettable memories. Friendships were formed. Stories and life experiences were exchanged. Sleeping under the stars, waking up the breathtaking sunrise, hiking through the burnt forest, or evacuating out of the fire...these are the memories that are I will never forget.

I've always loved nature; therefore camping, hiking or backpacking were not a new concept to me. However, everything we went through in there seemed strangely fresh and addicting. Every step was a new experience. The people in there made everyday an interesting experience for me. Each day, we shared different stories, learned new techniques, and witnessed new things. Creativity was overflowed. Though the journey was extremely difficult, I was always surrounded with encouragement and positivity.

One of the most valuable lessons I learned was how to take thing one-step at a time. If you know me, I often get anxious and worry about things that are out of my control. I like to know what is ahead of me, what I am about to go through and be prepare for it. At times, I freaked out when found out the distance we had to travel on that day or the elevation we had to go up. However, when I was told to focus on moving each step, the hike suddenly became easier and eventually got to my destination. This expedition taught me that sometimes you just have to let things go and just deal with it one step at a time. I also gained a more acute knowledge of what I actually need. I don't need a fancy phone to communicate, I don't need a memory foam mattress to sleep, I don't need ice cream or fancy Italian pasta. Simplicity can sometimes be really rewarding. Now I can appreciate and be able to find enjoyment in more things around me.

On the first day, we were asked to stand in a circle, put our arms around each other's shoulder and squeeze really tight. I quickly did what I was told without giving it much thought. 30 days later, we returned back to the exact same spot, wearing the same shirts, but we were a bit smellier, the squeeze was tighter and our friendship was definitely closer than ever. At the end of the course, I remember being asked what I wish to take home from this course. "Of course the walking stick that I found and used for the past 30 days" was my immediate answer. I soon realized that there are many other things that I could bring out with me: the perseverance, courage, friendship, knowledge and outdoor skills. These things that I built in there can and will become useful tools to help me achieve my future goals.

If you ever wondered what was it like in there for me, there is no way for me to talk about my epic expedition in a few sentences. I admitted that there were times that I tried to put together a dramatic story to tell people about the things that I did in here but in the end, I realized that it all came down to me. Only me would know those experiences and how those influenced me. I am going to borrow a passage from Morgan Hite's "Briefing for Entry Into A More Harsh Environment" to hopefully give you a sense of life in there: "We were organized, thorough and prepared. We took care of ourselves in basic ways. We entrusted people with our lives, learned to do without and persevered at difficult things. We learned to use new tools and we took care of what we had with us. We lived simple."

I can't even express my gratitude through this simple letter. This journey might only be 30 days, but within these 30 days, I've seen, heard, felt and touched the things that maybe I never thought I would be able to do. It was not only physically challenging, but it was also emotionally and spiritually. I was homesick at times. I wanted to give up when things were hard. I was terrified when one of my teammates cut her foot. In times like this, I almost lost faith in myself. But knowing that I have such a strong support system, I was able to persevere through all these hardships and made it home safely. Again, thank you so much for your generous donations, and because of that people like me and others get to experience such an amazing and maybe even life changing experience.

Sincerely,

Thao