



# BIG CITY MOUNTAINEERING

The art of getting under-resourced kids back to nature  
By Mike Adamson and Justin Roth

From city to summit. Big City Mountaineers  
Photo: Courtesy BCM

**A**s climbers, the power and importance of nature is all too obvious — the outdoors is where we play, push ourselves, and relax, and it's often little more than a short car ride away. However, experiencing nature is not so simple for many kids in the inner city who don't have access to the resources, or the outdoor community, that many climbers have.

Enter Big City Mountaineers (BCM; [bigcitymountaineers.org](http://bigcitymountaineers.org)), the Denver-based non-profit organization that for nearly two decades has been dedicated to "enhancing the lives of under-resourced urban teens through transformative outdoor experiences." BCM provides guided, eight-day long trips into wilderness area for teens who otherwise might not have the chance to get into nature. Working with established inner-city youth groups — whether faith-based, family-based, or community-based — BCM organizes five-youth backpacking and canoeing trips in which each teen is paired with one adult supervisor.

"Using the outdoors as a transformational element in people's lives is not a unique concept," says BCM executive director Mark Godley, who's been involved with the org since 1991. "What's unique about BCM

is 1) that we're dedicated exclusively to working with poor kids. And 2) we've been able to figure out a financial model to support our programming." That model is the fundraising half of BCM, which consists of several sub programs, such as Summit for Someone, in which you raise funds for BCM while taking a guided climbing trip to some of America's sweetest summits; or the Marmut-sponsored Pitches for Pros, in which you buy raffle tickets for a chance to win a day of climbing with a pro climber.

Once a youth team is assembled, they embark for their trip as a self-sufficient unit, carrying all they'll need for the week with them. As they hike or canoe, they'll learn the concepts behind the BCM acronym T.E.A.M. (Trust, Endure, Achieve, Meaning). But though the outdoors is integral to this experience, Godley is clear about the true purpose of the program: "At the end of the day, we're not trying to create outdoor enthusiasts," he says. "The adult interaction with the youth is the most important thing: we want the kids to take these new relationships with adults back to their inner-city environment."

During their trip, the youth learn to build new relationships and trust with their BCM mentors. Familiar comfort zones are left behind, and the teens have to

endure the physical and emotional hardships of their new environment. To combat these obstacles, mentors nurture a sense of achievement and accomplishment in their teens. One of the ways they do this is to treat the trip as a metaphor for the struggles and circumstances of daily life. This way the teens can take lessons and meaning with them as they return to the patterns of normal life.

A key to the BCM's programs is making sure the financial burden is not on the kids, as it is with similar programs not intended for under resourced inner city youth. The bulk of the costs are covered by fundraising and donations. Fortunately, says Godley, "many of us get involved in [the outdoor] industry because the outdoors plays an important role

in our lives." And the outdoor community has been very supportive of the BCM cause. W.L. Gore and Associates, for example, have put together a program called "Give a Warm Fuzzy, Get a Warm Fuzzy" ([www.giveawarmfuzzy.com](http://www.giveawarmfuzzy.com)). This program allows people in the outdoor community to log on and share their experiences with stories, photos, and videos. Also, people will be given the opportunity to make donations to BCM, as well as other Gore-sponsored organizations.

Big City Mountaineers provides a unique and incredible experience for those lucky enough to participate, but they need the support of the community to succeed. Go to [bigcitymountaineers.org](http://bigcitymountaineers.org) and check it out.

**Join BCM in helping under resourced kids experience the transformative power of a trip into the wilderness — here's how:**

- Enter the Pitches with Pros Raffle ([pitcheswithpros.org](http://pitcheswithpros.org)) — Win a chance for day of climbing with one of several pro climbers.
- Climb as part of Summit for Someone ([summitforsomeone.org](http://summitforsomeone.org)) — Take that peak you've always dreamt about, get a ton of gear, and raise funds for BCM while you're at it.
- Volunteer as part of BCM ([bigcitymountaineers.org](http://bigcitymountaineers.org)) — Get directly involved with the cause.
- Help BCM earn donations from W. L. Gore & Associates ([giveawarmfuzzy.com](http://giveawarmfuzzy.com)) — Go online and tell someone you know about the BCM program and help earn support from W.L. Gore & Associates for the program. **BC**