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### HOW I GOT HERE

## Erin McEvoy Program Director, Big City Mountaineers

By AMY PALANJIAN  
Special to THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

After working for environmental groups during and after college, Erin McEvoy's love of nature inspired her to explore Southeast Asia and Australia. It was there that Ms. McEvoy realized how fortunate she had been as a child; her parents spent much of their free time outdoors, skiing, bike-riding and hiking—and they always brought her along. Ms. McEvoy decided to make a career of giving that same kind of experience to others. She harnessed her passion for nature into a nonprofit career and now works for an organization that gives teens from economically challenged backgrounds the chance to experience the outdoors through extended backpacking trips. Amy Palanjian spoke with Ms. McEvoy about her role. Edited excerpts follow.

**Full Name:** Erin McEvoy  
**Age:** 32  
**Hometown:** Aspen, Colo.  
**Current position:** Program Director, Big City Mountaineers  
**First job:** Bus girl at a Mexican restaurant  
**Favorite Job:** Her current position  
**Education:** B.A., American University in International Communication, specialization in Spanish and Latin American studies  
**Years in the Industry:** 5  
**How I got here in 10 words or less:** A long, interesting trip.



Erin McEvoy in Antarctica

**Q:** Let's start with the basics: What is Big City Mountaineers?

**A:** BCM is a nonprofit that provides recreational team mentoring experiences to urban at-risk youth by taking them on weeklong backpacking and canoeing expeditions. All of our programs are single gender and have a five-to-five ratio of youth to adults. When you meet them on the first day before they have their experience, they are hesitant and quiet. Then, when they come back eight days later and are open to talking and are more full of excitement, it's phenomenally rewarding. I'm responsible for making sure that our program grows and maintains quality, screening and selecting partner groups and adult volunteers, managing the trip evaluations at the end of each summer and planning for the coming season.

### HOW YOU CAN GET THERE TOO

**Best advice:** "Find the cause you're passionate about and go for it. If the cause is not something you believe in, a nonprofit setting can be a very frustrating environment to be in. Be passionate, be patient, be flexible, and you will be rewarded," says Ms. McEvoy.

**Skills you need:** "Resilience and flexibility. Being able to go with the flow, with all of the ups and down that are common in nonprofit settings and still manage to come out on the positive side," says Ms.

**Q:** How did you end up at the organization?

**A:** I had posted my resume on several outdoor network job boards and the Executive Director sent me an email with the job description for a part-time position. I believed in the

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mission of the program so much that I decided I would work full-time and be paid part-time. I started as a regional program assistant doing logistical support, primarily managing and cleaning gear. After about seven months, the former program director left the organization and since the only other people there were the Executive Director and myself, I started to take on more responsibility. At that point I got full-time funding.

**Q:** What did you do before joining BCM?

**A:** After college, I worked for the Nature Conservancy in Washington DC -- where I'd previously done an internship -- prior to traveling through Southeast Asia and Australia. Once back home, I was contacted by a family friend who worked for the U.S. Antarctic Program for a position as carpenter at McMurdo Station. I went to "the ice" and worked in Antarctica for nearly a year. After spending so much time in areas where people who had very little [in the way of possessions or money] were extraordinarily supportive of each other, I came back with the goal of getting involved in something that would allow me to make a difference in the lives of others. The older I got, and the more stress that began to creep into my daily life, the more I looked to being outdoors to calm me down and bring back the feeling of happiness I felt when I was younger. I was also fortunate enough to attend both a grade school and a high school which focused on experiential education.

**Q:** You've had a long history with the outdoors. Was it always something you planned to turn into a career?

**A:** Both of my parents were outdoor-oriented. They skied in the winter, hiked in the summer and rode bicycles in-between. While they were doing these things, they would put me in a backpack and bring me along. I always had outdoors in mind because all of my schooling prior to college involved camping, outdoor recreation and environmental appreciation -- and I have a strong desire to protect the natural resources that made those experiences possible. But even more than that, I was really looking to connect with people.

**Q:** Nonprofits aren't known for paying well, at least in the early years. What influenced your decision to accept the position despite the monetary restrictions?

**A:** I believed in the mission of BCM so much that I made the personal decision to make it work. Money isn't a main driver for anyone working here. The people I work with believe in what we're doing. There's not a lot of "that's not my job" or "I'm not doing that" -- we're all flexible enough to jump in and support the needs of our coworkers. I think that's helped us grow. The first season I was here, we ran 21 trips. This past season, we ran 51. We're focusing on deepening the impact of the program by providing more pre- and post-trip support, really trying to build more around the eight-day experience.

**Q:** How many trips have you gone on?

**A:** Eight. My goal is to go on at least two trips a summer and become more involved with the girls we're working with locally. The trips are the best part of the job. You really come to understand that there is a difference to be made just by listening and staying supportive and going through a shared experience with the teens.

**Q:** What's your dream for the future?

**A:** I would love, someday, if we could expand the BCM model into every urban area around the world to expose hundreds of thousands of young people to positive adult role models and the outdoors. I'm ready to open the Auckland chapter.

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