

Families & Youth »



Photo by Andrew Jay

Building strong, confident boys: Young backpackers on a YBOYS trip from Shi Shi Beach to South Point. Many of these kids had never seen the Pacific Ocean, much less gone backpacking.

Boys Discover Hiking

Seattle YBOYS program introduces boys to the wonders of the outdoors

We have been hiking for about twelve hours when Gerald silently starts to cry. Exhausted and out of tricks, I try for a little conversation.

"So Gerald, what is the hardest thing you have ever done?"

"This," he mumbles, eyes on the ground.

"Really?" He pauses. "What about the second hardest thing you have ever done, what would that be?"

"This."

"This" is day three of eight on a YBOYS backpacking course. Over the next week, nine boys will work with my two co-instructors and me to hike the Olympic Coast from Shi Shi Beach to South Sand Point. For five of these boys it is the first time they have ever seen the Pacific Ocean, even though they have lived in Seattle their whole lives. For most of them this is their first time living outside, cooking their own food, and making real decisions with real consequences. For Gerald, this is the longest day of his life.

Six months prior to my conversation with Gerald, I was hired by the Metrocenter YMCA to start an outdoor education program that would serve low-income middle-school boys from the Seattle area. The idea—YBOYS—quickly took off, and by summer we had organized three trips, all with waiting lists. Due to generous donors, the majority of students participated on scholarship and had a chance to explore some of the rugged wilderness of Washington, learn leadership and life skills, and engage with the beauty and the mystery of the natural world. At the same time, students had an opportunity to

work with strong male role models from similarly diverse backgrounds, who helped to guide them on their journey from adolescence to adulthood. This is a transition that our society has never given the honor it deserves.

YBOYS had a very successful season in 2007 and we are expanding from three to eight trips this year—including three trips for high-school boys. The first applications are coming in from alumni looking to be part of a more challenging expedition this summer. Teachers and school counselors who sent students last year, and were impressed by their experiences, are scheduling presentations and handing out scholarships. Staff are signing up. Word is spreading.

It is an ambitious journey, and we are looking for allies to help us along the way. We need help finding clothing and equipment for scholarship students. We need help from land managers to get access to public lands. We need a space to store equipment for the summer. And we need help inspiring boys to reach out of their comfort zone and try something new.

Sitting around that campfire with Gerald that night on the Olympic coast I listened to students talk about what they have learned: that I can do anything... that I am strong... that it is all about thinking positive... that together we can achieve anything. After fourteen hours of grueling hiking over steep headlands and rocky beaches, after the hardest day of their lives, students sit around the campfire and thank me. This, they tell me, is something special. This is the coolest thing they have ever done. ♦

Andrew Jay

Andrew Jay is the director of the YBOYS program. More information can be found at www.yboys.org or by calling (206) 587-6119.