

Most people have one birthday, the day they are brought into this world -I have two –the day I was brought into this world and the day I began to emerge as an individual. On March 7th, 2008 I was escorted to a wilderness therapy program, Open Sky. On the cold evening that I arrived at my destination in the Four Corners Desert, I was thinking about how and why this happened, and was completely clueless of why I got sent away. When I was introduced to my group it consisted of three other boys who were there for different reasons than I, but that did not make a difference because we were all brought into the same situation by different circumstances and had to rely on each other to survive. During the first week I was pretty quiet and did not speak much. I isolated myself most of my time, as I did at home with my parents, and how I unknowingly dealt with the unhealthy relationship I was in with an over powering and dominant girlfriend. I felt trapped and helpless out in the desert and all I could think about was the relationship I was in and sadly how much I missed it.

A day in the life of wilderness was very unique. We hiked four days out of the week where the average distance was about three to six miles each day. We cooked our own meals in pots and pans, alongside the two designated chefs for dinner. We learned to create fires by using bow-drill fire kits that we made from the resources around us and we built our own shelters to sleep in at night, so if it rained or snowed, we would stay dry. We carried everything we needed in backpacks made from tarps, string and seatbelt webbing. If you were there for a while, you would eventually acquire an actual hiking backpack. The terrain we hiked through was usually canyon land, with a lot of steep areas that we would climb or descend from. Occasionally we would hike on dried up river beds, flat desert land, and at times we would come across dirt roads and hike on them for a bit. Every morning no matter where we were, we did yoga and meditation for at least forty-five minutes. The days of the week we were not hiking were spent at a base camp. This was where we replenished our food supplies, did our laundry with a bucket, plunger, and some detergent and also when we had the opportunity to shower. We would have an all group meditation during this period as well, where all three separate groups would join together for half an hour and meditate together. After three days at base camp, we would begin hiking again.

During my second week in Open Sky and we had gained three new members to our group. That week we would also be receiving letters from home. I got a letter from my

parents and decided to burn it, I didn't want to see anything they had written. I was angry with them for sending me away for a relationship that at the time from my view, was not harming me in any way. During the next week or two I began to open up a little bit more to the people in my group. I explained to them the relationship I was in and what had happened in it; how my girlfriend was verbally and physically abusive toward me. I explained to them how I justified it as "she was doing the right thing". The feedback I got from the group was as strong as an earthquake. They told me that I should listen to what I had just said, I played it back in my head and was mortified by what had I said, I couldn't believe that I thought that everything that happened to me was acceptable. I saw how damaged I was and began the proper work to heal myself.

The first step to my healing was breaking up with my abusive girlfriend. I ended it with her and was finally free; I could finally start the actual healing process. In the time of this healing I began to look deep into my root problems. I struggled with fatigue of the soul, low self-esteem and codependency. At this time I was still very quiet in the group although I had decent relationships with most of the other boys who were there. As I worked on my issues and became more wilderness savvy I was able to answer and speak up more to the others in my group for the first time, I wasn't restrained to being around just one person all of the time, and that people did like who I was. As time went on, I spoke a lot more and taught new group members what they would need to do in order to survive and be self-sufficient in their new desert home. Being a leader raised my self-esteem from the depths of the ocean and put it back on dry land. During this time I also began to pick up the guitar from the others who played it in my group. Playing music and just hearing the sound of others play music lifted my spirits phenomenally, which in turn helped me heal my tired soul and gave me a great coping skill.

I have become stronger in every aspect of who I am after I completed this intense ordeal of survival and personal growth. As I reflect on this experience, I have definitely seen a big change in myself from the past months. I have healthier relationships with the people around me including my parents. I am able to help others recognize destructive relationships and can now share ways to guide them as I was guided. Although I started my experience angry and confused, I am an individual who now sees the world in front of me with open eyes, an open heart, and an open mind.