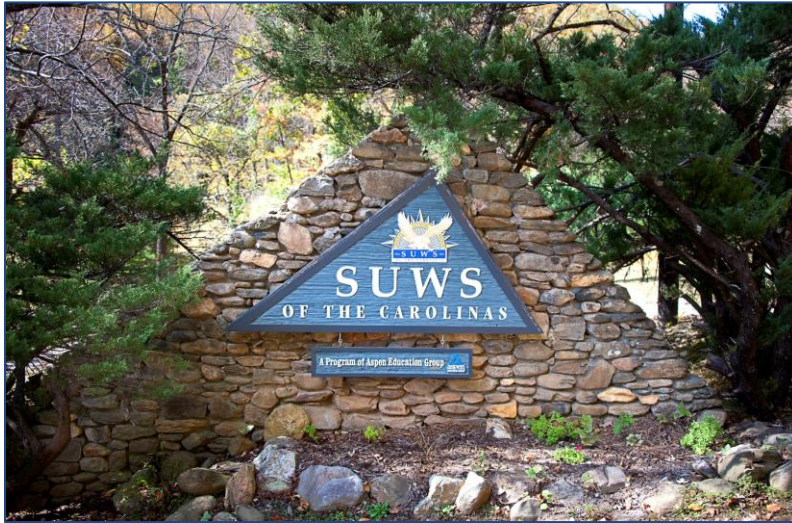


The Field Trip

By Roslyn Walker, MA, LPA

PART ONE



THE CHALLENGE

As a fairly new employee at SUWS, I felt it was a “must” to spend some time in the field (aka: the wilderness) with our field instructors and students. I mean the whole package; carrying a pack with the length half of my height, spending two nights in cold weather, filtering river water to drink, cooking over a portable stove, and learning the SUWS language (comprised of a multitude of acronyms!). I’ve generally considered myself pretty adventurous; however, I’ve never been a field instructor or a student at SUWS, so I was looking forward to stepping out of my comfort zone of convenience and taking things for granted. This is what we ask students to do when they enter our program and stay for approximately 53 days. Students come to SUWS from all over the country, and while they are diverse in backgrounds and experiences, they share a struggle to meet the demands of their typical environment due to poor communication and relationship skills, substance abuse and emotional and behavioral challenges.



I believed in the effectiveness of therapy in the wilderness when I worked as a psychologist, but the adventure I chose at SUWS solidified that belief even more and I’d say was one of my more enlightening adventures. Immersing myself in the daily milieu of field staff and SUWS students was the best thing I could have done in order to share with others how the forest, coupled with the support of field instructors and the therapeutic interventions of clinicians, brings about positive change for those who step into it.

THE EXCHANGE

The first part of my challenge began with shift exchange on a Wednesday morning. This is when field instructors that have been in the field for 8 days come back to camp and the new shift prepares to take their place. Finding my way to the bunk house I saw some familiar faces as well as quizzical ones. My turn about from wilderness casual to more serious outdoor clothing gave away my mission. Field staff split into three groups, depending on their level of experience, for training that explained the goals of field instructors and their roles in facilitating change for SUWS students. I appropriately joined the group of staff who had worked only a few shifts, got out my pen and paper and began to write.

This instruction was immensely helpful to me as it revealed that the goal of a field instructor is not to impose change, but to allow for change by empowering students to find opportunities for success. A field instructor creates structured activities and goals for students geared toward living in the wilderness, personal growth, introspection and a therapist's treatment plan.

CIRCLE UP

Circling up outside the bunkhouse prior to packing up, I felt the excitement of these special individuals that are energized by the idea of evoking change. I was energized at the thought that I would be shaping student's lives. After grasping hands that we raised into the air with a big "Hoorah", the buzz of preparation began. I asked to be paired with a field team that included females. Being a woman myself, I felt this would help me feel a little more comfortable when it came to understanding directions, sharing thoughts, and feeling welcome. It just so happened that the team of three instructors was all women, and they would be guiding five girls in group Luna. The foundation of SUWS' adolescent female group, Luna, is AUTHENTICITY, BELONGING, COMMUNICATION, and SISTERHOOD and my team was there to support that foundation.



We were given itineraries, collected student medications, and our personal food, or "p-food", bags. Fumbling like Goldie Hawn in the movie *Private Benjamin*, I quickly understood the importance of an efficiently packed backpack. Field instructors carry a large backpack on their backs and a smaller pack on their chest. These contain not only personal items such as sleeping bag, tarp, headlamp, clothes, "p-food" bag and toiletries, but also student manuals, tools, medications, hygiene bag, first aid kits, and radios. Students are responsible for carrying

group items such as cooking utensils, shared food, tents, and water filters. I found the physical aspect of this job to be constant both for instructors and students.



LIZ, JULIET, AND EMILY

There was no doubt that Liz, Juliet, and Emily wanted to be there; they exuded conviction, responsibility, and genuineness which immediately allowed me to feel I was part of the team. I could also tell that this was how all persons that ventured into their circle were made to feel, especially the students. They volunteered to teach me, but welcomed my wisdom as a woman 25 years older than them. They all had a fearlessness I wish I'd had at their age; a curiosity about new people, places and things. I contributed insight and enthusiasm about what may lie ahead of them.

Liz, the head instructor, with the most experience, ran the show. Upon meeting her, she wore a bandana around her neck that looked like she was wearing an ascot, and it contributed to her air of sophistication. Fashion aside, her organization and foresight was nothing less than amazing. She was a woman with a plan and she worked it.



And if that didn't work, she had a Plan B. Liz also knew about fun, though. She made an impression of a baby Pterodactyl that was hard to beat and left the students laughing out loud. Impressively, she spoke about her long term goal of becoming a neuro-feedback specialist.

Emily had worked several shifts. Tall and thin, with a chic asymmetrical haircut, she had a soft edge about her. While she might be seen as reserved, I could sense a quiet confidence as she considered the safety of the girls and gently interacted with them. She told me about the emotions and challenges she experiences when she is working. She explained that in the first two days or so, it is an adjustment to disconnect from everything in the outside world and get used to a new concept of time and living uncomfortably. The next four days, she settles into a rhythm and doesn't really think about her life at home. About two days before the end of her shift, she starts to get excited about having a warm bed to sleep in and seeing her friends. Despite what may seem as a roller coaster of comfort and discomfort, she is drawn back to the fun and challenge that the woods and the students bring.

This was Juliet's first shift. She relayed that she'd heard about this job from others that worked at SUWS and that previously, she worked as a river guide for two summers. She described herself as not glamorous and simple, although her natural beauty was clearly evident. She explained that after traveling across the country in her car about a year ago, everything in her car was stolen, including her clothes, identification, and money. She said that since then, it's easy to live with less clothes, she shops little, and is appreciative of what she does have. When I asked her about her desire to work outdoors, she implied that, similar to when her belongings were stolen, the uncontrollable consequences that nature brings allows you to learn about yourself and what you're capable of.

I think about the students we were with, all girls, and what great role models Liz, Emily, and Juliet were for them. They modeled teamwork, the ability to build relationships by talking (rather than texting), compromise, responsibility, care for others, and coping with any challenges of the day. Too, I realized how students were also teachers for us. They modeled strength when they tried a new skill like building a fire, asking for help, or carrying something for someone else. If they had a meltdown, they taught us that they can be resilient.

WHAT TIME IS IT?

As the day progressed, I realized that I did not know what time it was. While the morning activities required a steady pace to be ready for the staff exchange, I relied on lead staff to keep me on track. I'm not sure what time we actually arrived to meet our group, and by the time we reached our camp (I speculated it was late in the afternoon), I felt unsettled about this. I suppose I could have looked at my cell phone which I brought to take pictures, but I decided not to take the easy way out.



Deciding to push through the anxiety, I began to empathize with what I imagined SUWS students' experience to be. Like them, I wondered how I would be okay not knowing what exactly I'll be doing that day, where I'll be going, what my family is doing, etc. Throughout their stay at SUWS, students are not given future information, or "FI", so all one can do is focus on

the present moment and the task, or lack of task, at hand. This can be difficult for students who struggle to entertain themselves without technology, are generally anxious, or must be doing something to avoid emotional issues. I could definitely see that learning to be comfortable in the present moment takes time (go figure!), and that the key is to realize that you really can't control much except yourself in a single moment.

BOUND FOR LUNA



Our task was to guide group Luna. Many girls who enter Luna have experienced some type of trauma in their lives that often serves as the foundation for their challenges. After hiking up the road a few hundred yards we met with the girls and current field instructors. Liz, as the head, spoke at length with other staff so that we were kept abreast of what occurred during the previous shift and to ensure continuity of care.

Acclimating myself to the group and meeting the students was, for me, the most intimidating part of my field trip. The five girls were scattered singly about the field (within sight) in meditation time, or “med time”, and journaling. Not really sure what to do, I followed the other field instructors who greeted the girls and either sat amongst them or with them. I realized I didn't really have to “do” anything but be available, be observant and be a boundary by modeling proper respect for myself and others. I was surprised at how tiring the hypervigilance to what's going on with the students and the environment can be. You continually assess if all the girls are here, what they are doing, what is their mood, what the weather is going to do, etc.

STONE SEATS

Perhaps it was an hour and a half that we sat. By this time it was important to get to our camp and start preparing for dinner and nightfall. Our destination was the camp called Stone Seats. Stone Seats derives its name from the large stones that once served as the foundation for an old home, and it is now considered an archaeological site.

Liz, Emily, and Juliet requested that the girls “SASL (pronounced sassyl) up”, which means to get in a straight and solid line for our trek. The 30 minute hike took some ingenuity on my part, especially when crossing a river with a large backpack. I learned a whole new meaning of balance! I was also reminded that being with five teenage girls is an adventure in itself, and as we walked and talked I learned about the latest pop music and movies, their families and friends, and concerns about the future. Nonetheless, as the group moved toward Stone Seats, I sensed its increased strength and support and that we were moving toward something bigger than ourselves.



End of Part One

NEXT MONTH: PART TWO
Read ***First Night*** and ***Making Fire***