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Gonzo Girl

One camper's tale of courage and self-awareness on a difficult "choice" hike

By Becca Fitch

It was morning meeting at Camp Unalayee, high in the Trinity Alps wilderness in northern California, and it was time to make a decision. Actually, it was time to choose a hike from all those presented by this year's counselors--one that would round out the experiences and lessons learned during that session, and one that would provide experiences and memories to last through the long winter.

My usual preference for a "choice" hike was one that led to a lake for a layover--an entire day just packed with lounging, swimming and daydreaming. But, for some reason, this year I took a different route. This year, I went Gonzo. "Gonzo" is a slang term meaning fiercely partial, without regard for balance or objectivity. This definition is not far off. My "choice" hike was the most emotionally and physically intense experience of my life so far.

Never before had I exhausted my being so thoroughly.

But, I must say, the experience left me yearning for more.

Taking the Plunge

Their voices rang with power and enthusiasm.

"Come join Gonzo!" they yelled. "We are going to hike with 30-pound backpacks over 60 miles at an altitude of about 7,000 feet to two of the most spectacular (and remote) lakes in the world, Bingham and Statue. We have no idea if we will survive, but that's part of the fun. If you want to go on a challenging, dangerous, hazardous 'choice' hike in which we will be hiking nonstop, rubbing our feet raw and probably passing out, come join Gonzo!"

As John, Dylan and Marley sat down after introducing their hike, I had no idea it was where I would end up.

Back in the day, when my mom and dad were counselors at Camp Unalayee (where they met and fell in love), they led one of the gnarliest Gonzos ever. They traveled 100 miles in four days with four twelve- to fourteen-year-old boys and one girl. According to my mom, it was one of the craziest experiences of her life.

She said they traveled about 25 miles each day, mostly cross-country, and there were times when she practically had to drag her campers up the hills. Yet, somehow, they all made it--one of only a few Gonzos to avoid having anybody evacuated.

Maybe this was what inspired me to go Gonzo, or maybe it was that the counselors leading it were awesome.

Whatever the reason, I signed on the dotted line--the only girl out of a tribe of 13 hikers.

Starting Strong

Needless to say, when we awoke early that first day, I was terrified. Not only was I journeying into the woods with a rowdy group of testosterone-laden boys, but I also knew most of the boys were good hikers. Would I be able to keep up? Would I have to be evacuated (and humiliated)? Could I stand the stench of 12 grungy boys who were hiking 20 miles a day without showers?

The plan was for us to cover 25 miles the first day, ending up in Bingham.

We started strong, regularly re-hydrating and looking forward to our first stopping point, a sparkling spring where we would rest and refill our water bottles.

I was feeling fairly good despite the smoldering heat, but my feet ached like nothing I had ever felt before, and I already had two huge blisters on each foot. I found that, as long as I kept my feet numb by hiking, I was fine. Eventually, we left the Pacific Coast Trail and our own Trinity Alps wilderness area and entered the treacherous Russian Wilderness Area, home to our first stopping point and our final destination.

We were all really low on water, but unfortunately, when we arrived, the spring was empty. Our counselors seemed unconcerned. They told us not to worry, there was another spring only a few miles away. They warned us to curb our water intake as a precaution.

It was here the day turned for the worse--dehydration and delusion making it seem like a death day.

Death Day

Each time I went around a bend, I searched for the sparkle of a spring. I stopped occasionally and listened for the sound of water but there was none. My entire tribe began to get delirious; we were all parched to the bone. But I kept going. I stayed at the front the entire stretch, thinking, "The faster I go, the sooner I will reach water."

I looked behind me and saw Sharky, staggering as we walked on. I kept going. I charged on and soon he was out of sight.

As I walked, I thought of my mom. How brave and strong she must have been to lead her "choice" hike. With each step, I looked down to see my muscles bulge, imagining they were someone else's muscles, a strong warrior like my mom. A fearless leader ready to face whatever came my way. With each step I morphed myself: my mother, my sister, Hillary Clinton, Buffy, Susan B. Anthony, Rosa Parks, my grandmother, Ani DiFranco and on and on. That day I took on many shapes, many histories, many strengths, many weaknesses.

But through all my forms, I found my roots.

I found connections between all of those people and myself. I was strong, powerful, capable and revolutionary. And I kept going, one foot in front of the other, nice and steady until, finally, we reached the spring. I began to run, no longer feeling the ache in my feet or back. All I could feel was cold, refreshing, nourishing water slipping down my throat. Never before had water tasted so grand.

Gonzo Girl

We stayed at that spring for an hour, the longest break we had taken so far. We drank, ate and slept. We felt our bodies heal themselves and our minds focus. I took in the shade first and then the sun, cooling off and warming up. But we had not yet reached our destination. We still had a ways to go before we could really rest.

From that moment, I knew I could do it. I was a fierce woman warrior, and I was not going to stop. I stayed at the front almost the entire trip. I kept pace with the fastest and passed many boys in the process. “Damn, Becca, you are charging!”

And I knew inside, we were charging. All the influential women of my past and me, we were charging on, gaining respect, confidence and power. Showing the world we could do it. I could do it.

We had two evacuations on the trip. A fifteen-year-old boy, who went back on the first day, and one of our counselors, a twenty-year-old who talked tough, but whined like a baby about his blisters, before we evacuated him.

But I made it all the way. And when we returned home to the basin, John told my mom, “Becca was going faster than all of us!”

An exaggeration, but only slightly. When my mom heard that, she smiled proudly at me and told everyone I was leading the pack. But I knew I was only a part of the pack. Joining the influential women of our past who have paved the way for the rest of us. The accomplishment I felt after returning from that hike was indescribable.

I was now a Gonzo girl.

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About the Author:

Becca Fitch is an eloquent 17-year-old senior at Harbor High School in Santa Cruz, Calif. She loves the environment, and her favorite class is biology. Her mother is a teacher, and her father has been camp director at Camp Unalayee for 20 years. Becca loves drama and just directed her high school spring musical, *Guys and Dolls*.