



ARC STUDENTS FIND THEIR Voices in Yosemite

On a Wednesday evening in late July, more than 250 people watched online as Jasmine Marquez introduced a live-streamed YouTube event: the annual Adventure Risk Challenge “Voices of Youth” celebration.

Years earlier, Marquez had participated in Adventure Risk Challenge (ARC), a program for California high school students that blends outdoor education with literacy and leadership. Now, as an ARC alumna and member of the program’s Young Professional Board, she reflected that

ARC helped her navigate through college and into a rewarding career, and positively affecting her, her family and her community “like a tiny ripple effect that turns into a roaring wave crashing onto a beach.”

For more than a decade, Yosemite Conservancy donors have supported ARC, helping dozens of students participate in academic-year activities and a multiweek Sierra Nevada summer course. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted ARC to adjust its programming, but the experience has been as powerful as ever.

After Marquez spoke, the camera view transitioned to a stage in Oakhurst, California, where ARC Executive Director Sarah Cupery Ottley explained the unique circumstances of the 2020 “Voices of Youth.” Normally, the ARC summer students would be reading to a packed house. With gatherings limited due to the pandemic, they were instead speaking in person to their fellow participants and a handful of ARC employees — and, it turned out, to the largest audience in the event’s history.

The eight Guerrerx, as the 2020 ARC summer-course participants dubbed themselves — it’s a gender-neutral version of the Spanish word for “warriors” — had started their monthlong journey in early July, when all participating students and staff had tested negative for COVID-19 and come together in an isolated “bubble” for four weeks of learning and adventuring, from their southern Yosemite base camp to the remote backcountry.

Despite pandemic precautions, the core elements of the summer course remained intact: The students spent 15 days backpacking in the Yosemite and Granite Chief wildernesses, challenged themselves on ropes courses and rock walls, learned to read maps and pitch tents, interviewed community leaders, and completed hundreds of hours of academic coursework. As one student, Tony Marquez, explained, learning outside in a tightknit group

made for an inspiring educational experience: “I cannot express how different it feels here versus in a classroom,” he said. “When you feel the support that everyone is bringing ... it’s really empowering.”

And, fulfilling a key part of the ARC experience, they composed metaphorical poems, drawing on observations of the natural world to describe deeply personal experiences.

On the Oakhurst stage, the first student presenter stepped to the microphone, looked out with a smile and began to read: “I am a colony of ants ...”

For the next 35 minutes, the students spoke through the evocative lenses of sequoias, fire, flowers, sunlight and moonlight. After each poem, cheers erupted from the in-person audience, and it’s safe to say that rapt at-home viewers were clapping and smiling along with them.

Thanks to your support, the 2020 ARC students have been able to continue benefiting from a meaningful program, to find their voices among Yosemite’s waterfalls and peaks during an especially tumultuous year — and to inspire people far beyond the Guerrerx group with their confidence and courage. ■



To learn more about ARC and read blogs from this summer and past years, visit adventureriskchallenge.org



OPPOSITE The eight Adventure Risk Challenge 2020 summer course students started their journey together with a weeklong backpacking trip in Yosemite. To ensure the safety of all involved, ARC required staff and students to follow strict safety measures and test negative for coronavirus before the course. During the course, they traveled together in a “bubble,” interacting in person only with one another. **ABOVE** Writing and public speaking are core parts of the ARC experience. While in Yosemite, the 2020 students participated in writing workshops, captured observations in journals, and worked on the metaphorical that they presented at the online “Voices of Youth” event at the end of July.