

Aspiring poets learn about the outdoors

By **KELLIE FLANAGAN**
Staff writer

They appeared in their own poems under a diversity of guises: egg, eagle, redwood tree, rainbow trout, the moon. Voices trembled, deep breaths punctuated the truth as words fell like curling leaves around them.

The trees will burn, and I will burn,
but that doesn't mean I will fall.
Little by little the brush may clear,
until something will change.

Change enough that I may just
grow back and resist the fires that
are forced upon me.

I know that things will never go
back to normal,

That my family will always be different,

But maybe different is okay.

Maybe different is worth it.

— **Emily Zaragosa, 10th grade, Los Banos High School**

After three expeditions, 20 days of backpacking in the Yosemite Wilderness, and nearly a hundred miles, a dozen high school students and their mentors stopped for one night to rest and reflect.

The young poets wrote of love, and toxic love, of independence and separation. They talked about death and loneliness, leaving the nest, standing out and blending in.

They'd come a long way, both metaphorically and physically, to get to this point at Sierra Meadows in Ahwahnee, and they were ready to share their lives and stories at the Adventure Risk Challenge (ARC) "Voices of Youth" poetry reading.

They were the sun, they were an eclipse. This was everything.

I breathe deeply
I tell myself
You can do this
You can study
You can work triple
To make your family proud

I begin to extend my wings
I start to fly peacefully
And majestically
I cannot believe that I'm doing it
I am following my dreams

— **Yuli Yadira, 11th grade, Oakland International High School**

The July 29 fundraiser was created in support of nonprofit ARC and its mission to empower underserved youth through integrated leadership, literacy and wilderness experiences.

"Most of our students have never backpacked a single day before this summer, but that didn't stop them," said Sam Rapoport before introducing students for the poetry reading.

"They have been witness to bears and blazing heat, deer and drought, marmots and mayhem," Rapoport continued.

"These indomitable spirits have ascended 20,000 feet over these 20 days, two-thirds the tower of Everest. They have rock climbed and conquered fear, blasted Bad Bunny in backseats, (and) spent 24 hours alone on the shores of Buena Vista Lake, just to better know the sound of silence."

Being alone sometimes is good,

It makes me stronger and it helps me recognize my capacity,

Putting in hard work makes me grow in a lot of ways.
For example, I try every single day to learn new things,
to always be open to new experiences,
always trying to improve myself and learn from my mistakes.
First of all, I would like to show myself what I am capable of.

— **Josue Zelaya, 12th grade, Mission High School**

Five days into their first backpacking expedition, Rapoport said, students were asked to find their inner voice and marry it to an element or spirit of the natural world, weaving prose from the newly spun threads of their journey in ARC.

"Hours of soul searching and wordsmithing and many mornings of poetry practice brought their journey of a hundred miles" to the stage at Sierra Meadows, Rapoport shared.



Photo by Sam Rapoport

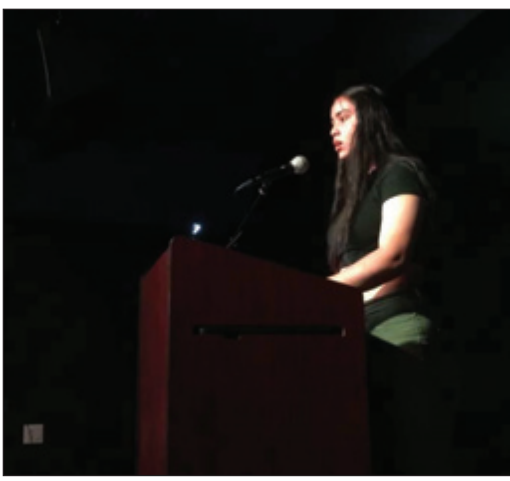
Duncan High School rising senior Angela Escoto, foreground left, is photographed during a reflective moment of this summer's ARC program in Yosemite. "Nature eliminates distractions in ways that other spaces don't," said the organization's executive director. Writing is a big part of the program.)

I start to form into a beautiful chrysalis.
Something elegant, something divine.
This smaller home gives me time to think about what I can do better.

A place where I feel safe, where I reflect on my actions and grow.

My cocoon, my home.

— **Virginia Nava, 10th grade, Firebaugh High School**



Virginia Nava, rising Firebaugh 10th grader, was one of a dozen ARC participants who shared their prose in Ahwahnee last week during the nonprofit Adventure Risk Challenge "Voices of Youth" poetry reading at Sierra Meadows.

and outdoor education, and it truly changes lives."

Most of the students in this summer's Yosemite group will attend high school in Fresno and Merced. Participants are selected for their leadership potential, willingness to learn and challenge themselves, need for an experience that bolsters their academic and leadership skills, and lack of access to meaningful and transformational experiences in the outdoors.

"They are the next generation of neighbors, leaders, parents, elected officials and educators," said Oakhurst resident Sarah Cupery Ottley, Executive Director of ARC.

"They will shape communities, the economy, and society. We facilitate experiences and programs so they can identify their strengths, harness their power and become better communicators, community members and humans — then we are all better off."

Academic year programming generally follows the month long-plus summer learning opportunities in ARC, inspiring students to become lifelong learners, stewards of the environment, and leaders in their schools and community.

"The value of a long duration immersive experience, partly in a wilderness setting, is that our students have enough time to deconstruct beliefs about themselves and other people and reconstruct positive and true beliefs about themselves, and to gain a new sense of identity and purpose."

Ottley said the young people benefit from having enough time to "find their voice through writing and public speaking." Without access to cell phones or social media, "they are discovering themselves through their own reflection and the feedback of teammates and ARC staff members."

To see what sticks, ARC employs a few different evaluation tools like the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) survey, which measures 40 different internal strengths and external supports of young people, and their growth in those key areas over time.

Over the course of a month, Ottley said, she can really see a difference in participants.

"It takes a few forms: increase in self confidence is one of the most obvious changes we witness in 34 days. We also see significant increases in things like, 'I enjoy reading and being read to' and 'I can see myself attending college.'"

Being able to begin to visualize college attendance is a big one for students who may not get as much support in that direction as others. Part of the value of ARC is

The Yosemite group was not the only ARC operation this summer; other students also graduated from the program in Sequoia and Tahoe.

Since 2004, ARC has supported youth in developing skills in literacy, leadership and life.

"ARC links wilderness to academics, adventure to leadership, identity to literacy and confidence to activism," the nonprofit's website reads. "ARC's interactive and innovative year-round programming is rooted in the integration of rigorous academic instruction



Photo by ARC English and outdoor instructor Sam Rapoport. Firebaugh High School 10th grader Virginia Nava was photographed in the Yosemite Wilderness while participating in an Adventure Risk Challenge (ARC) program this summer.

tions in ways that other spaces don't. We hope that our students will come to love nature and choose experiences in the outdoors in their personal time, as well, so they become caretakers of our planet, valuing nature and outdoor places."

Watching and listening to the youthful bards, it's easy to understand what's going right for the ARC program. Hearing from the executive director, it's also easy to understand the many administrative challenges faced by the organization, not unfamiliar to most anyone with a career in nonprofit leadership: primarily, the uncertainties of a more than \$600,000 budget, satisfied solely by donations and grants and fluctuations in funding.

Right now, though, Ottley said many of the challenges faced by staff have to do with supporting students through mental health crises and challenges.

"More than ever before the pandemic, students are dealing with depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation," she said, overtly grateful for the two mental health advisors supporting ARC. "They play a very crucial role."

Ottley, married and the mother of two young children, knows the importance of balance when it comes to health. In addition to her role with ARC, she is a musician who plays violin with the popular band, The Trespassers.

And she loves her work with ARC, especially the working with students part. The best thing, she said, is the progress people make when attention is paid.

Those in attendance at the poetry reading last week were impressed and touched by the strength and vulnerability shown by ARC students after their summer program.

They didn't disappoint, and left the audience both smiling and in tears, clapping like thunder.

"The best thing is that we consistently see measurable positive changes that our students are making in their own lives during and after our programming, and we know it is worth every dollar and every ounce of effort we invest into it."

For more information visit adventureriskchallenge.org.



Oakhurst resident Sarah Cupery Ottley, shown here, is executive director of the nonprofit organization, Adventure Risk Challenge. "We know it is worth every dollar and every ounce of effort we invest into it." The married mom of two also plays violin in the popular band, The Trespassers.



Photo by Sam Rapoport

Full-time Adventure Risk Challenge instructors include Jesus Alejandre, left, Central Valley Program Coordinator, and Cristina Cruz Navarro, Tahoe Program Coordinator. ARC students this summer graduated from programs in Yosemite, Sequoia and Tahoe.



Josue Zelaya, a rising senior at Mission High School, is shown during the Adventure Risk Challenge "Voices of Youth" poetry reading, held at Sierra Meadows in Ahwahnee last week as part of the Yosemite summer program.



Photo by Sam Rapoport

Adventure Risk Challenge summer participants for 2021 are shown in the Yosemite wilderness. During the 34 day challenge, they hiked 100 miles. From left are Angela Escoto, Cienna Mendoza, Ivan Meza, Selena Lopez Ortiz, Emily Zaragosa, Roberto Josue (prefers Josue), Allen Mendoza, Virginia Nava, Angel Escoto, Karla Malaca, Karla Suarez and Yuli Yadira. (Sam Rapoport)