

GETTING THE PICTURE



"The Green Beetle" by Jourdyn, 17, St. Croix National Scenic Riverway. Through Northwest Passage, a western Wisconsin-based organization that helps at-risk youths, and a grant from the National Park Foundation, several teenage boys visited various national parks to learn about nature photography.

"In a New Light," a program that uses nature photography to help teenagers deal with behavioral or mental health problems, not only helps kids heal but also has produced art good enough to be exhibited at the Minnesota state Capitol and go on a national tour.

By Andy Rathbun
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It was night in Yellowstone National Park, and Chris Spencer was one of the last in his group still awake.

Wanting to take a few more photographs before he went to sleep, he walked to a nearby river, set up a camera and shot a

30-second exposure of the water as it flowed through a grassy break in the trees.

"The photo looked different from any other I had ever taken," said Spencer, 18. "It turned out way cooler than I ever thought it would."

Spencer's visit to Yellowstone last year was part of a western Wisconsin-based program that

uses nature photography to help teenagers deal with behavioral or mental health issues.

The program sent teens on four trips to national parks last year, and the resulting photographs have been turned into an exhibit that is on display at the Minnesota state Capitol and will



PHOTO COURTESY OF BEN THWAITS

A photography student becomes the subject of a nature photo at Badlands National Park. The teenager is participating in a program that helps at-risk youths. For more photos from the exhibit, go to photos.TwinCities.com.

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soon travel the country.

"For these kids, the process of watching the community embrace them and show support for their art is very empowering and transformative," said Ben Thwaits, expressive arts coordinator for Northwest Passage, the organization that runs the program.

"These are kids who, for many of them, have never felt rewarded for anything positive in their lives," Thwaits said. "They never had anybody say, 'Hey, good job on that.'"

The program, "In a New Light," was started two years ago by Thwaits, a former professional photographer who had been looking for a way to incorporate the art form into the organization's 90-day residential treatment program in Spooner, Wis.

"We got a small grant from the National Park Foundation for five cameras and a couple computers, and the kids latched onto it like nothing anyone could ever imagine," Thwaits said. "They invested everything they had in it, and it became a really magical experience for them."

The nonprofit Northwest Passage partnered with the National Parks Service and began using the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway as a training ground for the budding nature photographers.

"It's a great way to connect kids to the park," said Julie Galonska, chief of interpretation and education for the riverway. "And then you think of the healing aspects of the program. What organization wouldn't want to be a part of that?"

TEENS FACING HARDSHIPS

Many of the kids in the photography program are being treated for mental health problems — anything from severe depression to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Thwaits said.

"What these kids have in common is they all have experienced significant struggles in their life, whether it is at home, in school or in the community," he said. "A lot are referred through the juvenile justice system."

He said just getting through the day can be difficult for them because their minds are often in a place of anxiety and stress.

But through nature photography, that can change.

"When you can get them on the river or in the woods and put a camera in their hands, you can see them relaxing," he said. "It's creating a stable emotional baseline, and it's from that baseline, that stable place, that all sorts of therapeutic things can happen."

Mentor relationships, for instance, can form more easily when photography is involved, he said.

"My relationships (with the kids) became much deeper and more therapeutically effective as a result of this program," he said. "It's been this really nice venue to create relationships."

Fighting drugs and not getting along with his parents led Spencer to Northwest Passage last year, he said. While participation in Northwest Passage is anonymous, he allowed his name to be used for this story.

Spencer, who lives in Plainfield, Ill., said his time in the program has helped restructure his thinking.

"It teaches you to think a different way," he said of the photography component of the treatment. "You look at

things that you normally don't see, kind of like a different eye on the world."

PARK TOURS

Last year, Northwest Passage received a second grant from the National Park Foundation, which helped fund the national park trips.

In all, 22 teenage boys participated in a trip to Yellowstone National Park, Badlands National Park, Isle Royale National Park or Rocky Mountain National Park.

"All of these trips were rugged, backcountry trips," said Thwaits, who accompanied the teens. "It was long hikes, sleeping in tents, filtering our water and eating a lot of rice."

The experience was out of the comfort zone for many of the kids, but as days went by, they grew more at ease with their natural surroundings, he said.

"It's so natural for us to embrace these places and connect to them," Thwaits said. "And that's what these kids did on a very deep level."

By the end of the trips, he said, the kids didn't want to leave.

For Spencer, the trip was not only his first to Yellowstone; it was the first time he had ever been camping.

"It was amazing," he said of the experience. "It was one of the coolest things I have ever done."

GAINING MOMENTUM

Northwest Passage, which also has facilities in Frederic and Webster, Wis., has expanded the photography program based on the success at its Spooner facility, Thwaits said.

There are now a couple of dozen community partners that help fund it.

IF YOU GO

What: "In a New Light: At-Risk Youth Find Hope Through Nature Photography in National Parks"

When: 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday; through Monday, April 30.

Where: Northwest corridor, Minnesota state Capitol, 75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., St. Paul

HOW TO HELP

Donations of digital cameras and money can be made by contacting Ben Thwaits at 715-327-4402 or bent@nwpltd.org.

"We've had an outpouring of community support — people who want to help the kids on this mission," Thwaits said.

Currently, Northwest Passage is seeking donations of digital cameras to give to the program's graduates.

"A fairly good percentage of the kids continue on with photography afterward," Thwaits said.

Spencer said he's saving up for a digital SLR camera. He was new to photography when he started the program but now says it's something he'll continue for the rest of his life.

"People have told me I'm really good at it," he said. "I like what I can do with it, and I have a lot of fun doing it. All the way around it's pretty rewarding."