If I have learned anything in 47 years on the planet, it’s this: the power of nature creates deeper connections to ourselves and others.

Today’s young people are desperate for connection, and not the sort of half-truth connection from social media. No, they want the deeper kind where they smile broadly from a shared moment, or cry unabashedly in front of someone, knowing they see you and will stay. It’s the kind of connection you feel after a crewmate helps you carry your pack the last mile when you are tired and hungry or you just need someone to sit with you and watch the stars twinkle.

My heart aches for the challenges youth are experiencing today. I long for them to have a sense of belonging and connection. I see what they are losing now in the age of technology, global health and climate crisis and the fast paced world. What does it mean to slow down, pause and connect with another human in nature?

Lately, I find myself thinking about something a student said on the closing circle of his Outward Bound course. He said he could use his brain again after his week of phone-less backpacking in the desert. We are all glued to technology and we need to be reminded, and even taught, how to look up, look around and see our surroundings.

At Outward Bound, we provide that. It’s a glimpse into life without the internet all the time, where at the end of your day, you sit shoulder to shoulder with your newest friend, while cupping your hands around hot chocolate, and laugh over the silly song you all made up while setting up camp. And then you share what was hard about your day. Your friend looks at you, and says, I felt that too.

It’s the embodiment of this quote by Desmond Tutu. “I am human because you are human. My humanity is caught up in yours.”

How I love that quote! We have a role in the mental wellness of our youth. We can show them how to connect in nature, and through that, they can see the humanity in one another.

As I approach the end of my time at Outward Bound California, I see this letter as my own closing circle of sorts. So like the students who share their takeaways, this is mine: I know that the inspiration I had on my own courses and seeing our students breakthrough and connect on theirs, has settled into my DNA and will forever be a part of me. I’m so grateful that for 25 years I have been a witness to young people’s lives forever changed for the better from their time in nature with Outward Bound and each other.

In community,

Definitions

Protective factors are conditions or attributes that promote health and well-being and reduce the impacts of a risk factor.

Risk factors are characteristics associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the learning process of developing the self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work and life success.

These key social-emotional skills are a protective effect for students at-risk of developing problems related to substance abuse, mental health, and violence, and can have impacts on long-term outcomes such as college graduation and employment.

Outward Bound programming is a protective factor, the opposite of a risk factor, in youth mental health and wellness. We are not the solution to this crisis but our programs provide some of the skills needed to overcome it. An investment in Outward Bound has a social impact that reverberates to students’ communities, schools and homes.

Here are four ways:
OUTWARD BOUND OPERATIONS IN CALIFORNIA

Outward Bound established operations in California for two main reasons: to address the lack of quality social-emotional outdoor programming in schools and the even deeper deficit in access for communities of color and low-income schools. Access is key to our mission and we do this by providing scholarships to individuals and schools, free gear, courses close to home, and culturally relevant programming.

NARROW THRESHOLDS ON 10 SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERS REPORTED THEIR STUDENTS HAD FALLEN BEHIND IN SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ARE LEAST LIKELY TO HAVE FORMALIZED SEL AND SERVICE-LEARNING PROGRAMS AVAILABLE TO THEM. (1)

With a ropes course located amidst towering cypress trees in San Francisco, Bay Area students from our partner, Burton High, can walk less than 20 minutes to feel the breeze and step outside their comfort zones on the high elements.

In 2022, we also offered 40 full scholarships for our two week summer programs which included gear, free boots and a travel stipend so students could swim in the chilly alpine lakes or climb bouldered desert canyons. In addition to those scholarships, 28 veterans went to Joshua Tree National Park for an all expenses covered 6-day desert expedition and tapped into the healing benefits of teamwork and challenge in nature.

“IT disappoint my guard on this trip and let my fellow brothers and sisters into my safe space. This was the perfect timing to start working on trust. It allowed me to get a fresh positive start to the new journey I need for healing.” - 2022 VETERAN COURSE ALUMNI

RESOURCES

1. Ready to Engage: Perspectives of Teachers and Parents on Social and Emotional Learning and Service-Learning in America’s Public Schools

2. Estimating Whether Replacing Time in Active Outdoor Play and Sedentary Video Games With Active Video Games Influences Youth’s Mental Health

3. Nature Plays Key Role in Kids’ Mental Health, Review of 300 Studies Confirms
The real job of an Outward Bound Instructor is to put themselves out of a job by the end of the course. As time goes on, they do less training and managing of students and pass more and more of the responsibility to the youth themselves. This is why we see such high impact around self-regulation and emotional control — both incredibly important elements of mental health and well being. “There is a substantial and rigorous body of evidence showing that students learn more and classrooms are more effective when children and adolescents have the skills and competencies to manage emotions, focus their attention, successfully navigate relationships with peers and adults.” (1)

Alongside how to set up a tent or cook dehydrated potatoes, Instructors teach critical interpersonal skills like how to identify emotions, work through them, seek feedback from peers, and make changes next time they arise. The more time spent on course in this tight knit peer group, the more opportunities they have to practice and master these lessons.

There is something about doing hard things together that solidifies connection. Students have been through the ringer as they emerge from Covid isolation, grapple with climate change and rally around social change. Outdoor experiential learning courses are inherently a social experience where groups of students work as a crew to overcome challenges and build trusting relationships.

With loneliness on the rise (2), Outward Bound courses can be a balm of connection, which improves physical, mental, and emotional well-being. We hear it time and time again, our participants make lifelong friendships after 7, 14, or 22 days in the wilderness. Students who feel a sense of belonging have lower prevalence of poor mental health and tend to do better in school.

We hear it time and time again, our participants make lifelong friendships after 7, 14, or 22 days in the wilderness. Students who feel a sense of belonging have lower prevalence of poor mental health and tend to do better in school. (3) Time away from the triggers of screen time, social media and a divisive culture forces young people to build relationships IRL (in real life), social skills that they will take home with them to support self-esteem and engagement long term.

## Self-regulation

An ability to counter distraction and strong emotions by calming, refocusing, and turn-taking.

## Resources

1. The Evidence Base for How We Learn: Supporting Students’ Social, Emotional, and Academic Development
2. The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University. Connectedness & Health: The Science of Social Connection
3. CDC Mental Health, Suicidality, and Connectedness Among High School Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic
On average, students in 2022 reported the most growth in Group Relationships, Perseverance, and Self-Regulation.

Since the 60s, Outward Bound has created identity based courses beginning with an all-female expedition. We find that crews that have shared lived experiences connect and build trust quicker than in more diverse groups.

The recent release of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey Report reports that close to 70% of LGBQ+ youth experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during 2022. On our LGBTQ+ courses, Instructors who share their identity or have demonstrated allyship, create the space to explore identity, self confidence, compassion and perseverance together.

For non-binary students on LGBTQ+ designated crews, students reported even more growth in self-awareness and self-regulation compared to non-binary students on non-affinity courses.

In addition, non-binary students in LGBTQ+ crews reported greater positive outcomes in every measured outcome than non-binary students in all other crews. As this is the first year of measuring this data, and it was a small sample, we need more data to have more conclusive statements. We’ll continue to measure this in the coming years.

The Outward Bound Outcomes Survey (OBOS), designed and validated by the Partnerships for Education and Resilience (PEAR), measures student change in 12 areas.

Students take the survey at the end of their course, and report on each area. In 2022, 744 OBCA students aged 12 - 24 completed the OBOS. Our students showed statistically significant positive change across all measured outcomes, regardless of course length. Outward Bound is teaching key social and emotional skills, and through this our students are building confidence, deepening friendships, and increasing emotional awareness.

The Outward Bound Domains of Thriving (DoT) highlights the four areas of human development that are impacted on an Outward Bound course: Courage, Belonging, Reflection, and Physical Engagement.

We measure student change via the OBOS and analyze the results to improve programming, staff training and provide equitable outcomes for all students across race and gender.

We find that crews that have shared lived experiences connect and build trust quicker than in more diverse groups.

The recent release of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey Report reports that close to 70% of LGBQ+ youth experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during 2022. On our LGBTQ+ courses, Instructors who share their identity or have demonstrated allyship, create the space to explore identity, self confidence, compassion and perseverance together.

For non-binary students on LGBTQ+ designated crews, students reported even more growth in self-awareness and self-regulation compared to non-binary students on non-affinity courses.

In addition, non-binary students in LGBTQ+ crews reported greater positive outcomes in every measured outcome than non-binary students in all other crews. As this is the first year of measuring this data, and it was a small sample, we need more data to have more conclusive statements. We’ll continue to measure this in the coming years.

The Outward Bound Domains of Thriving (DoT) highlights the four areas of human development that are impacted on an Outward Bound course: Courage, Belonging, Reflection, and Physical Engagement.

We measure student change via the OBOS and analyze the results to improve programming, staff training and provide equitable outcomes for all students across race and gender.

When we compared results base on race, students of color showed similarly positive growth across outcomes regardless of the racial makeup of their crew.

Outward Bound California Long Survey Subsample Students of Color (n = 149 students), Mean Differences by Crew POC Affinity Status, 2022

LGBTQ+ POSITIVE GROWTH

SELF-REGULATION LGBTQ+ AFFINITY CREW 0.69
Self-Regulation Other Crew 0.27
SELF-AWARENESS LGBTQ+ AFFINITY CREW 0.71
Self-Awareness Other Crew 0.35

INCREASING INCLUSION

When we compared results base on race, students of color showed similarly positive growth across outcomes regardless of the racial makeup of their crew.

POC Affinity Crew (n = 35) Other Crew (n = 134)
Harnessed in and clipped into the rope via carabiners, Kria climbed up the ladder to the log element. Getting to the top of the tall ladder was the easy part. Once up the pole, the next move was to step out onto the horizontal log which is suspended 35 feet in the air.

Whew, this is high, she thought. But she had been assured there was no rush and to take her time. An Instructor called up to her. “This is the hardest part, once you let go, it will be easier.” In order to make her way across the log, she had to release her grip on the staples and figure out how to place her feet.

A teacher called to Kria that she was already an inspiration since she got to the top. And then she did it, she released her hands and grabbed the rope above the log. She made her way naturally across the log. Her Instructor was right, letting go was the hardest part. Once at the end, she wasn’t ready to get down. The Instructor called up again, “Do a little trick if you want!” Balancing on one foot, she kicked out her other foot for a few seconds.

Kria came to the Ropes Challenge Course September 2022 with her high school, Civic Center Secondary School. Kria was excited to try it, but also feeling apprehensive since it was all so new and she hadn’t done anything like this in the outdoors.

“After the course, I felt like I could do anything. My adrenaline was pumping. I wanted to do more elements. It was a really good day and it boosted my energy,” Kria said.

During the debrief circle, the Site Manager shared about an apprenticeship program available to learn to teach on the course. Before he finished speaking, Kria’s hand was already up. She applied that winter and was accepted.

Students participate through ‘challenge by choice’ meaning that they can opt into their challenge; they won’t be forced into doing anything they are uncomfortable with, though they may be encouraged to take the next step. For example, if a student climbs halfway up an element and wants to stop, an Instructor may ask them if they can do one more step, and the student can decide. If not, they can come down. And the Instructors celebrate every win, because even climbing partway can expand one’s comfort zone, then maybe the next time that student will take one more step.

Before the student even steps foot onto the elements, the Instructors have set the tone. “We break things down into manageable steps and explain how things work,” Julie, a Challenge Course Instructor said. “We assure them that the harness and the rope can easily hold their weight, and we move at a pace that’s comfortable for them. Sometimes that means taking just a few steps up the ladder and then being lowered so they can get the feel of it.”

A game often played before students go up on the course shows three zones marked by three circles: the inner circle is the comfort zone, outside is the challenge zone and then outside that is the panic zone. The Instructors ask a series of questions and the students move through the circle. For example, what zone are you in when you’re watching Netflix at home? All students move to the comfort zone. What about giving a presentation in front of your class? And then the students disperse into different zones. Introducing comfort zones gives participants the language to be able to articulate and understand their physical and mental response to challenges. The Instructors create a safe environment for individuals to push themselves.
2022 was a year of growth, challenge and change in many ways. Staffing shortages and impacts of climate change on weather continued to pose challenges to running programs. We still served nearly as many students as we were pre-pandemic and grew both our Ropes Course programs and overnights in Joshua Tree. It was a remarkable year for our advancement efforts, raising over $2.18 million. Thanks to an amazing circle of alumni, family, and community members, we are able to offer more scholarship support than ever before. This success coupled with high enrollment on our fee-based programs and continued Covid-related government tax refunding - we ended the year with a surplus and five months of unrestricted cash on hand. This set us up for a solid start to 2023.

“I am a very shy person who doesn’t take risks because I think it is scary. Coming here changed that. I got to be myself with new people. I felt very safe and welcomed here by the amazing Instructors. I feel like I have new friends and a new family. We did struggle because of the harsh weather, but together we were able to overcome it. I would do it all over again.”

Darlene from Alliance Gertz-Ressler High School in Los Angeles
Wellness and connection don’t stop with our students. Our field Instructors need this too. Outward Bound California, like so many other industries, is facing a massive staff shortage. Without Instructors, we can’t serve more students or achieve our mission. They are truly the magic makers - deeply empathetic teachers, highly skilled risk managers, passionate environmentalists and trained professionals. It takes two years to train an entry-level Instructor into a lead Instructor through days and weeks on the trail under the mentorship of more experienced staff. We have a long term goal to increase our pool of Instructors and ensure they are as racially diverse and gender expansive as the youth we serve. It’s a tall order!

Full-time positions, higher pay, benefits, paid training, professional development funds, access to mental health services, and year round work are some of the investments we have already made in our field Instructors. They also receive room and board when they are working at one of our two basecamp locations. The community built on these live/work basecamps is vital in retaining our Instructors and creating a sense of belonging.

Stephanie Sherman, field Instructor of five years said, “People come back and keep doing this work because of the built-in community.” This community is home. It’s a place to refresh, prepare and reflect.

It’s time that our basecamps in Joshua Tree and Midpines draw staff in for more than community, but also serve the physical needs of staff. Both locations need investment in housing, infrastructure, workspace, kitchens, bathrooms and climate controlled spaces so staff can weather the temperature extremes. To this end, we launched a capital campaign, Build our Base, and have raised nearly $1,000,000 of the $4,000,000 needed to complete the purchase and upgrades of both properties.

**PARTNERS**

Abraham Lincoln High School (ALHS)
Anaheim Union: International University Preparatory
Aptos Middle School
Bayview Hunters Point YMCA
Berkeley Hall School
Blue Oak School
Boys and Girls Club Visitacion Valley Clubhouse
Burton High School
Civic Center Secondary School
Claire Lilienthal
Community Boards
Community Grooves
Community Ropes Course Day
Democracy Prep
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Middle School
Francisco Middle School
Friends of the Urban Forest (FUF)
Get Out And Learn/Downtown High School
Harpeh Nat. Sr. School
Hiltons
Hope SF
Horizons at San Francisco Friends School
Ikea College
Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters of Los Angeles
John O’Connell High School
June Jordan School for Equity
KIPP King Collegiate High School
Larkspur Corte Madera School District
Life Academy of Health and Bioscience
Life Sciences and Digital Biology
Los Angeles Audition Society
Mediro
Melrose Leadership Academy
Mentoring for Success
Mission High School
Oakland Military Institute College Preparatory Academy
Outdoor Educators Institute (Justice Outside)
Pacific Bay Christian
Presidio Knolls School
Public Service Pathway
Real Options for City Kids
Redwood Academy of Utah
Richmond High School
Rosie the Riveter Trust
Rubella Newcomer High School
San Francisco State University
Seeds3
St. Raymond Catholic School
Stevenson School
Sunrise Middle School
Templeton High School
The Bayshore School
The Branson School
Twitter Inc.
Visitation Valley Middle School (VVMS)
Westborough Middle School
YES Nature to Neighborhoods
Youth Leadership Summer Instructors

**INSTITUTIONAL FUNDERS**

Arthur & Carlye Cicco Charitable Foundation
Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation
AT&T
Black Dog Private Foundation
Beta Vista Foundation
The Bernard Osher Foundation
The Bilton Foundation
California State Coastal Conservancy
Cleo A. Blyth Charitable Foundation
Climate Ride
Chrysalis Fund
CM Capital Foundation
Crescent Porter Hale Foundation
The Dean and Margaret Lesher Foundation
Dodge & Cox
Dr. Spaulding
Dragnet Stuart Youth Fund
Ford Motor Company
Fort Point Capital Partners
GoPro
The Heard Foundations
Helman Foundation
Holubin/Lucan Family Foundation
John and Marcia Goldman Foundation
Kahan Foundation
Lampert Byrd Foundation
Lesher Foundation
Lisa Stone Pricket Family Foundation
Marsh Conservation Fund
McKinnon Family Foundation
Mountain Camp
National Parks Conservation Association
Noah Langholz Remembrance Fund
Outward Bound Inc. (OBUSA)
Pando Alliance
San Francisco Department of Children Youth and Families
Shauna M. and Kevin B. Flanigan Family Foundation
Silicon Valley Community Foundation
The Stanley S. Langendorf Foundation

**BOARD MEMBERS**

Ed Collinston, Co-Chair
Winn Ellis, Co-Chair
Natalie McCullough, Secretary
Greg Yap, Treasurer
Eric Styles
Tristan Brown
Paul Danielson
Andrea Friskee
Anastasia Greenmore

**CITY SKYLINE CHALLENGE SPONSORS**

**BUILDING OUR BASE: AN INVESTMENT IN CULTURE AND COMMUNITY**

Learn more about our Build our Base Campaign, email development@obca.org
Dear OBOC,

Today is my last day of course and I'm surprised to say I'm very sad to go. One of my goals at the very beginning of course was to learn something about myself. Today I can confidently say that I completed my goal and I learned much more than I ever realized. While out climbing, I noticed that my positive self-talk and the recent encouragement of my peers motivated me to reach the top. After suffering a near calamity due to a severe case of hypothermia, I could never have imagined myself hiking and surviving over 1,600 miles in the desert. I have learned my mind and body are capable of far more than I could have ever imagined. From my instructor, McKenzie, I learned compassion, how to be there for my peers, deal with conflict, and combat my own emotions. The course taught me resilience and confidence and created a space for me to form close bonds with my peers and friendships that I will maintain beyond course. Although it was short-lived, my 12 day course left behind memories and lessons that I will take with me for the rest of my life. I have never been on an “outdoorsy” person and did not expect to gain as much out of the course as I have. The appreciation of setting, meaning taught me to focus on the positives throughout my day and to be grateful for my experiences. “Ownership” taught me integrity and understanding for myself and others. I am extremely grateful for my Outward Bound experience and hope to come back and learn more in the future.

Sincerely,
Katalin

Thank you McKenzie and Colter and everyone else who made this trip possible!