

A WALK IN THE WOODS: APPALACHIAN TRAIL ADVENTURE

By Joanna Satterwhite '13

Well, I can't say we were pretty, but the views sure were—I guess that's to be expected from a four-day trek through the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. Excursion was literal for me and 11 motley classmates of mine this year, as we fled the suppressed mania of Atlanta for a much quieter (and, as I would soon find out, much colder) corner of the world. We landed at the Fontana Dam in North Carolina with intent to throw ourselves onto the Appalachian Trail. And so we did. Therein lays the best thing about hiking: it's a self-actualizing activity. Not to toot my own Excursion's horn, but most of the other groups were doing things for a separate end. Knitting to make a scarf, researching the justice system to finish a prescribed project, basically doing one thing to get to another. We were walking to walk.

Coming from the crazy world of high school where my entire existence is rationalized by moving on to the next level, I can't tell you how refreshing this was. Walking was walking was walking, and at the end of the day, such simplicity clarifies you. Breathing was beautiful just because it was (especially after ascending four miles straight up a mountain!), as was eating and sitting and sleeping. Life is a subjective experience, but I think I speak for all of my peers on this trip when I say that our jaunt into the wild polished our senses of being. We'd wake up in the mornings, look at our feet, stretch our backs, and think to ourselves, "OK, so this is what I'm working with today? Let's get to it."

As a result of the straightforwardness of it all (or maybe it was high altitude sickness? Who's to say?), our group started having real, human interactions. You can't sit next to someone and gaze off the top of the tallest mountain both of you have ever been on without feeling like the two of you are sharing something big. Whether it was a fellow student or a teacher, my conversations began shifting from "so, how's about that math class?" to learning about the other person's childhood, aspirations, trials, and triumphs. One teacher and I spent a good 45 minutes around the campfire one night talking about our families while staring straight up into the Milky Way.

Stuff like that just can't happen when you're in classroom learning about osmosis, or James Madison, or the benefits of a slant rhyme in a poem. That's all important, but sometimes there is more, what Henry David Thoreau called "the essential facts of life."

Even though it was only four days, I'd say everyone in A Walk in the Woods came away from our trip feeling, just a tiny bit, like Thoreau himself.