

I remember my first time on the American River. I had just finished fourth grade, and days before had moved across the country from Ohio to Auburn. My grandpa was sick, and I had to start at a new school. My life was a mess. When my mom's high school friend invited us on a rafting trip, I was unsure about it. I didn't know anything about wild rivers or rafting. Looking back, though, I see how that afternoon on the river was vital in helping me feel at home in a new place. Nature had been one of my favorite things in Ohio. On that day, I got to experience a beautiful California landscape for the first time. In the adrenaline of that adventure, I forgot about the cancer that was making my grandpa sick and my fear of fifth grade. The rapids carried me away from my problems. I was left with a sense of awe at this place I could now call home. Since that day, the canyon has continued to inspire me. I find beauty and adventure on every trail I explore. That's why I want to help preserve places like this and plan to attend college next fall as an environmental science major.

Though my love for the canyon was nurtured in that long ago river trip, the roots of my passion for nature go back even further, to when I was an elementary school student in Ohio. I participated in many nature programs that were sponsored by the local parks department. I remember a guided moonlit walk around Charleston Falls, led by a Native American who talked of his people's history while playing his flute under the stars. I remember a field trip where I learned about Queen Ann's Lace and different types of birds. I remember a summer day camp where we built forts out of sticks and sang songs on our marches through the woods. Activities for children were abundant, nearly free, and encouraged a deep appreciation for the outdoors.

I believe that similar programs in the American River Canyon would help ensure the canyon's health by giving more children access to this beautiful local resource. A group of committed volunteers could establish programs for children and their families. Sample activities might include Saturday camps where kids go on short hikes, monthly guided walks for families, and campfires where stories of the canyon's history come to life.

Spreading awareness to the younger generation is one of the best ways to protect our parks in the future. Expanding recreational opportunities for local children through guided volunteer activities would be a great way to do that. As long as enough people care, the canyon will stay safe. The canyon and nature are a vital part of who I am. I want to make sure that the next generation of children experiences that same wonder, so more little girls can enjoy the freedom of having their worries washed away by a day on the rapids.

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