

Marie Johnson, Placer High School

Ultrarunning in the American River Canyon was my dad's passion. In 2000, my parents moved to Auburn from Alaska to be close to the American River Canyon so that my dad could run for miles up and down the canyon walls. Throughout my childhood, we spent many days exploring the remote parts of the North Fork and Middle Forks of the American River while my dad trained for his races. While waiting in the canyon forests for my father to finish a training run, my mom and I would turn over rocks in streams and study intricately constructed caddisfly homes or spread a blanket, play a game, read a book and have a picnic while listening to the hawks cry out to each other.

My connection to the canyon extends beyond my time spent in wild places waiting for Dad. Long ago before I was born, my grandparents established a river rafting company that started with trips down the South and North Forks of the American River. Being on the river was in my family's blood, so it was not unusual to find us floating down it in various rafts. Even my grandma had her own inflatable kayak!

Speaking of my grandma, for most of my life she lived in the canyon near the Manzanita and Stagecoach trailheads. On one of the many trail walks that I took with her, a bear with her cubs crossed our path and would not budge; so, we reversed our course a bit in awe over the beauty of the local wildlife. The canyon gave so much to us that my mom and I would regularly participate in the Great American River Clean Up. In sixth grade on a very smoky day, I made a video for a class project showing me picking up trash at the Confluence. Through an Auburn community program, I was able to make a ceramic fish with my name on it that is now a permanent part of the American River Canyon Overlook sign.

My parents later divorced. My grandma moved to Oregon. Consequently, my time in the canyon shifted to weekends with Dad exploring canyon places I was not sure his car could return from. Dad, our dog Oscar and I panned for gold near Oregon Bar, went paddleboarding on Lake Clementine, swam at Robie Beach and Tamaroo Bar and fished the crystal clear pools of the North Fork. We had some good times together there. Canyon time was now our time and no one else's.

On October 19, 2017, that all came to an abrupt end. The principal called me into his office and the police chaplain informed me that my dad was gone. Gone? Later, I realized that my dad was running from depression and that it had finally caught up to him. It was a depression that a run in the canyon could alleviate temporarily, but it never took it completely away. I never questioned why we were always waiting for Dad. But, now I know that my dad suffered from mental illness and that the time spent in the American River Canyon gave him much needed relief.

In an effort to help others who battle depression and/or are surviving the suicide of a loved one, I have participated in raising money for the American Foundation for Suicide

Awareness in 2018 and 2019. In addition, I have actively participated in the Mental Health Awareness Week at Placer High School. Unfortunately, suicide happens too often in the canyon via the Foresthill Bridge. Sadly, a bridge that my dad had threatened jumping off. Through a local organization, I have written "notes of hope" that it puts on the Foresthill Bridge to encourage people to ask for help instead of jumping. The canyon gives relief in more ways than one.

My connection to the canyon is bittersweet. It brings memories of extreme happiness and devastating pain and greater compassion and understanding of those who suffer from depression. I choose to focus on the many happy canyon adventures that I shared with my father. With my family, I continue to explore and spend time there and everytime I do, I feel refreshed and closer to my dad. Poor mental health has negatively impacted the American River Canyon through the never-ending stories of people jumping off the Foresthill Bridge, but it has also positively impacted many more people's mental health including mine. During Covid-19, many families have had more time to explore the American River. The trails have been full and it makes me happy that others are benefiting mentally during this trying time from all the canyon has to give. Without a doubt, the American River Canyon is a place of solace and mental health and it should be protected for generations to come,