



# NEWSLETTER

## Peak Experiences at Mountain Lake Academy

Written by Bethany Garretson, Assistant Program Manager

The world began to brighten as four students eagerly awaited the sunrise, their anticipation palpable. Gary Semo, the Adventure Coordinator at Mountain Lake Academy, gazed towards the horizon, his eyes fixed on the Green Mountains of Vermont beyond Lake Champlain. A faint pink sliver began to rise, signaling the approaching dawn.

For Gary, the day had begun hours earlier. Rising before the sun was a customary practice in his line of work, and his excitement outweighed any fatigue. His passion for the outdoors was ignited during childhood adventures with his father and grandfather, which fueled his decision to study outdoor education and ultimately led him to join Mountain Lake Academy in 2012.

Nestled in a sprawling six-million-acre state park, Mountain Lake Academy offers students a plethora of outdoor activities, from hiking and camping to rock climbing, fishing, canoeing, skiing, and biking. Additionally, during each phase cycle, the Adventure Based Activity Staff works closely with the students to plan their individualized Peak Experience. These trips are tailored to reflect the cumulative progress of each therapeutic phase. This was the reason for Gary's early start that day—the Phase One students were embarking on a sunrise hike up Hurricane Mountain.

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At the campus, Gary met his co-guide, Annie Ireland, and together they went from door to door, rousing the Phase One students from their slumber. As their classmates slept, the Phase One students stirred with anticipation. Gary and Annie provided guidance and support throughout the morning routine, ensuring that packs were organized and food prepared before the team set off for the trailhead.

As the students disembarked from the van, headlamps illuminated the pre-dawn darkness. Packs securely fastened, they began their ascent. Despite the chilly Adirondack morning, their bodies quickly warmed with exertion.

Ascending the mountain in darkness, Gary witnessed the students' determination and resilience. As the first light of dawn began to break, a mixture of anxiety and excitement coursed through their veins. Would they reach the summit in time for the sunrise?

"In some sense, they were just trusting the system," Gary reflected. "I saw frustration. I saw camaraderie."

Their perseverance paid off when they spotted the tall silhouette of the fire tower—their arrival just in the nick of time. Shedding their packs, they donned parkas in the crisp, clear morning air. All eyes turned eastward. As the sun emerged, its rays transformed from pink to vibrant orange, captivating the students. They asked Gary to capture the moment, attempting to hold the sunrise in the palm of their hands.

"No matter how many sunrises you see, it doesn't get old," Gary beamed.

Returning to campus, the students radiated with excitement, sharing their experiences with their peers. They brought back fragments of the sunrise, sharing its beauty and magnificence. That night, they spoke to their parents on the phone, recounting their adventure, describing the simple yet profound joy of witnessing a sunrise atop a mountain. The students' enthusiasm epitomized the essence of a Peak Experience—they understood that such moments stay etched in memory, forever evoking the emotions and accomplishments associated with them.

We all require Peak Experiences in nature to unravel the complexities of life. The answers lie within the sunrises and sunsets, the mountains and rivers—they surround us, waiting to be discovered. We need only embark on the journey.

**DAYS IN THE BACKCOUNTRY WE'LL  
NEVER FORGET.**