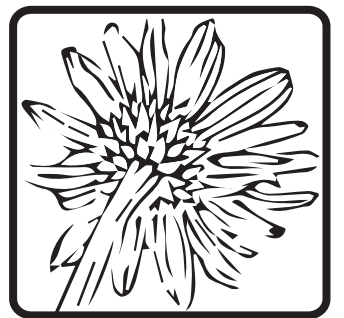
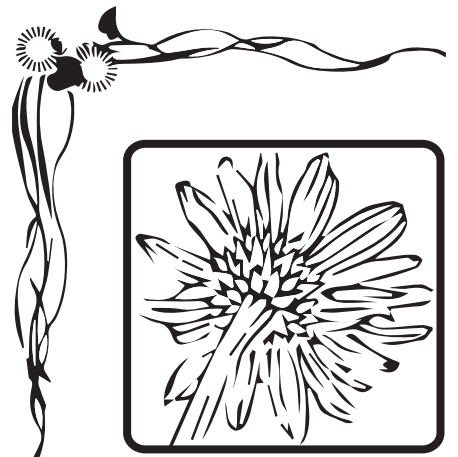




# High Rocks JOURNEYS



SUMMER 2014





# THIRTEEN

by Diana Clarke

High Rocks AmeriCorps Volunteer, 2014



Sometimes it's hard to remember that an organization like High Rocks is made up of individuals. It's often just as hard to remember that, as an individual, my transient actions shape this organization, which in turn shapes me. That what I do extends far outside of me, that High Rocks existed for a long time before I worked here, and that it will be here a long while after. How do I understand my obligation to women I have never and will never meet? I find my answer through stories. We are all made of them—the ones people tell us, and the ones we tell others about ourselves. Those stories whose endings are unsatisfactory propel us forward, asking us to make choices and determine our paths.

This morning I overheard Susan Burt conducting phone interviews with summer intern candidates. She asked them what they were like at age thirteen. “Every one of them knew exactly what they were like at that age,” she told me. “Who they were at thirteen tells you a lot about a person.” What it also tells you is that thirteen as an age is more than itself. Symbolically, it is a cusp—adolescence, the beginning of the transformation from child to adult. We all remember who we were at thirteen because it was when the questions came, and we became aware of how other people saw us, which often made us profoundly aware and sometimes critical of ourselves and our ideas. Who would we be? We could start to see real independence in the future, but adulthood was still far enough away that our dreams could be enormous and ambitious.

However, sometimes we felt powerless to achieve what we imagined.

Our dreams and wishes are as much a part of our identities as what we've already done. You are not just who you are but what you want—or, better, what we want is who we are, and the people who understand why we desire what we do also recognize and understand what we are made of.

In my short time at High Rocks, I've been struck above all by the level of humanity here. By the awareness, among girls, AmeriCorps members, parents, volunteers, board members, and staff, that we all are flawed people working to become better and more understanding. What are we good at? What brings us happiness? We are always on the cusp of something.

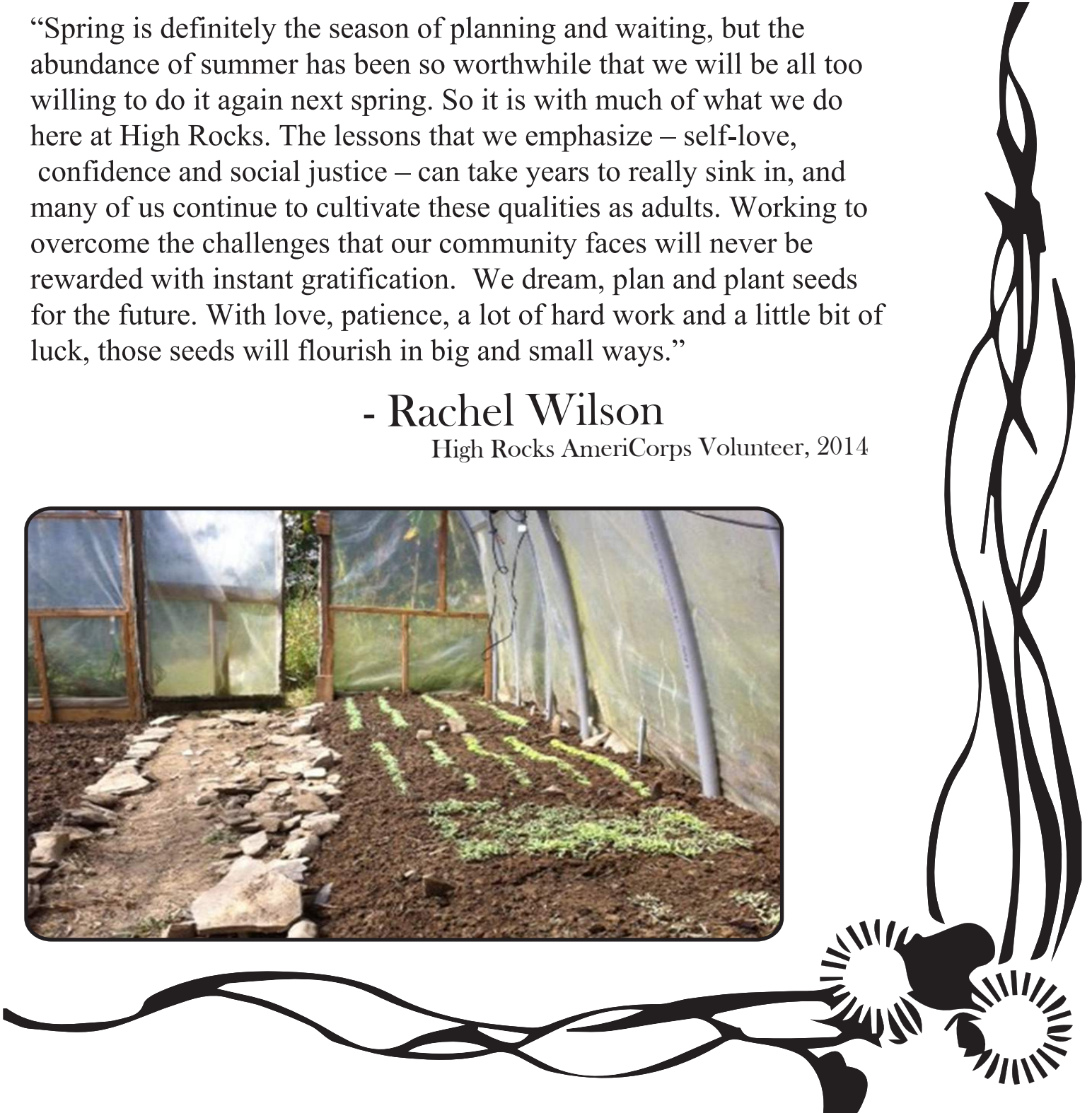


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“Spring is definitely the season of planning and waiting, but the abundance of summer has been so worthwhile that we will be all too willing to do it again next spring. So it is with much of what we do here at High Rocks. The lessons that we emphasize – self-love, confidence and social justice – can take years to really sink in, and many of us continue to cultivate these qualities as adults. Working to overcome the challenges that our community faces will never be rewarded with instant gratification. We dream, plan and plant seeds for the future. With love, patience, a lot of hard work and a little bit of luck, those seeds will flourish in big and small ways.”

- Rachel Wilson

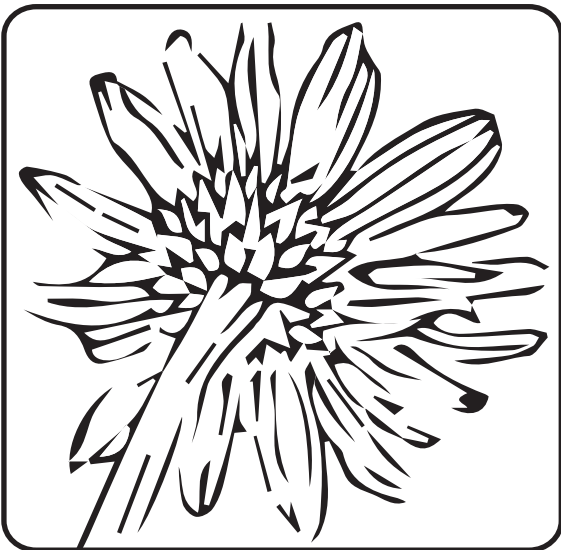
High Rocks AmeriCorps Volunteer, 2014





“THERE WAS THIS  
OVERWHELMING  
SENSE OF  
ACCEPTANCE...”

The High Rocks Academy for Girls has had a long standing motto to educate, empower, and inspire; as an alum of the program I can attest to this motto. High Rocks takes incredible strides to give girls the resources to explore their creativity, leadership skills, and their sense of adventure. They open up doors and avenues that are not usually accessible to young girls in rural Appalachia. High Rocks has touched not only my life in a deep and fundamental way but also hundreds of other girls, who would not have had an opportunity to even go to college without this program.



While growing up and living in small towns in West Virginia, we as young women are faced with a surprising amount of adversity. As an adult, I now understand how to deal with the challenge but as a teenager I felt isolated, confused, and bored. My peers, my teachers, and the adults in my life wanted nothing more out of life and all I wanted was to be an artist, to explore the world and understand the meaning of life. I had questions, questions that were answered in an appallingly disgusted tone, saying, “You’re a freak” or “You’re so weird”. They didn’t understand my desire to excel in spite of having the entire deck stacked against me because we live in extreme poverty, because we live in rural West Virginia, because someone somewhere said that I was not good enough.

Like most people in West Virginia I had to overcome a painful childhood. I became an adult long before my teenage years, dealing with situations that most adults in their thirties and forties could not handle. Looking back I would humbly say that I dealt with them in a fairly graceful manner, but I would not have been able to conquer my demons without the support and dedication of High Rocks and all of the loving people who work here.

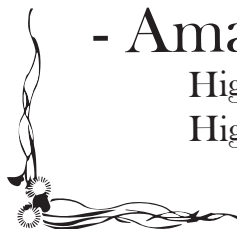
There was this overwhelming sense of acceptance when I sat down at a High Rocks recruitment meeting in 8th grade. As the women spoke of their traditions and ideals, I felt myself falling in love with High Rocks before I even stepped foot on the land. They threw around concepts that I had until then thought were creations in my mind, such as judgment free zones, long lasting bonds of sisterhood and friendship, and most importantly that it was okay to think beyond the small world of Marlinton, West Virginia.

I found the foundation of who I am with High Rocks and with every discovery of my soul I gained confidence to take on the world. I was able to better articulate and express myself. These seem like novel ideas to most but I never had anyone in my life tell me that it was okay to be whatever I wanted to be or that if I worked hard enough no dream was impossible.

Like every girl and lady who has come before me and who will come after me, we hold a reminder of these achievements, in the form of a photo. The photo is of me from New Beginnings Camp. This picture is not a glamour photo, in fact my hair is disheveled, my forehead is beading sweat, and my cheeks are bright red. My clothes are old and ragged and stained with droplets of mud. Even though I am a mess in the photo, I still have it; framed in blue painted wood with daisies glued on all four corners. I will carry it with me wherever my road may take me because it was the first time I ever felt accepted, like I wasn't the freak my peers called me, and that I wasn't alone. It was the first time I felt like I had power. That picture of me is beautiful because you can see the true me being able to shine.

High Rocks teaches girls that it is okay to be themselves and that the only person that they should please is themselves. Those photos are what High Rocks is all about. It doesn't matter what you look like, all that matters is that if you are proud of who you are then you are gorgeous!

- Amanda Peaytt  
High Rocks Alum, 2006  
High Rocks AmeriCorps Volunteer, 2014





# SCIENCE, SURVIVAL, AND APPALACHIAN WEALTH

by Grow Appalachia Coordinator Erica Marks

Whenever I have an opportunity to teach science at New Beginnings, I start thinking through curriculum months in advance, usually in the middle of the night. I always start with the big questions. What will empower girls to make decisions based on rational habits of mind? What will help them notice and grab with both hands opportunities they have at school and elsewhere to find and use the best information available, and when it isn't available, figure it out for themselves? What do I hope this generation of young women will understand about their roles as consumers and stewards of Appalachian wealth?

I am not certain, but I have a feeling that this is not the same starting place for the creators of any of the science textbooks I have come across in my years as a classroom teacher. There may be a place in science education for the reciting of the Seven Steps of the Scientific Method. There may be a place for appreciating the wonders of life by listing the body parts indicated by metal pins pushed through a gray pickled earthworm on a tray. There may be places for these sorts of tidy, quiz-able, science-y things, but one of those places certainly isn't High Rocks.

Would you sit on a bench and do a crossword puzzle when visiting the Louvre in Paris? Would you listen to a podcast on your MP3 player while at a live performance of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony? Would you opt for a bag of potato chips at a banquet at the Greenbrier Hotel? No. No, you would not. Likewise, the natural setting for High Rocks classes takes scientific learning to another plane. When girls step into the shade of shagbark hickory and tulip poplar trees a new science teacher takes over. This one has been honing her craft since the Paleozoic era. She speaks to the girls in primal voices they might not even be aware of even as they listen to her through ears inherited from foragers, hunters, and gatherers. She is, of course, the Appalachian Mountains.

“this is the curriculum  
of survival...”

Up until this point, the girls' science education has likely been pretty flat—flat textbooks, flat handouts, flat walls, flat ceilings, desks, chairs, computer screens...but, oh, the relief they find in our mountains! When concrete floors give way to ancient rounded river stone, when cinder block walls are replaced by the fractal geometries of ostrich ferns and when fluorescent-lit ceilings of classrooms dissolve to reveal the dome of the heavens, a part of their mind awakens from a long nap.

What is the lesson taught by cave crickets, with antennae so long I fear they can sense I am writing about them now? What is to be learned from the mayflies that live all but the last one of their days under the riffles of waterfalls then spread their wings and find love on the eve of their death? What can we take from the orchid that depends on spidery threads of fungus to open and feed its seeds under the soil? These beings have been sensing their environment, maximizing opportunity, and forging beneficial relationships for eons.

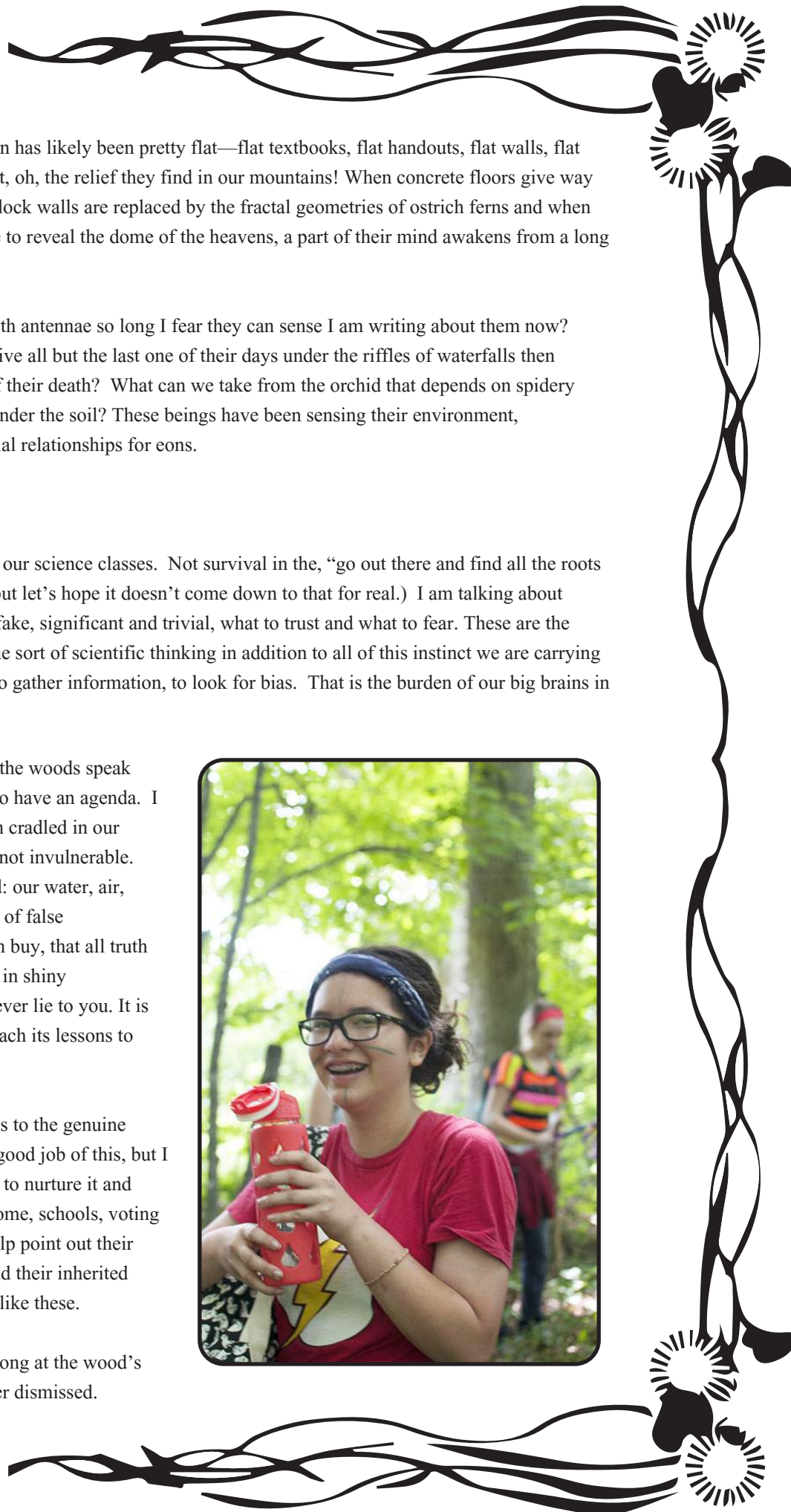
Theirs is the curriculum of survival.

And survival is the biggest question of all for our science classes. Not survival in the, “go out there and find all the roots and berries you can eat” sense. (That’s fun, but let’s hope it doesn’t come down to that for real.) I am talking about learning the difference between genuine and fake, significant and trivial, what to trust and what to fear. These are the survival skills that require humans to use some sort of scientific thinking in addition to all of this instinct we are carrying around—to weigh evidence, to be skeptical, to gather information, to look for bias. That is the burden of our big brains in this world we have created for ourselves.

As a mere human teacher, I step back and let the woods speak louder than me (as if I have a choice). But I do have an agenda. I want the girls to recognize the genuine wealth cradled in our forest—wealth that is enduring, resilient, but not invulnerable. This wealth can give us exactly what we need: our water, air, food, medicine, shelter, and beauty. In an age of false promises—that happiness is a fashion you can buy, that all truth comes from experts, that the best food comes in shiny wrappers—the forest is one thing that won’t ever lie to you. It is the ultimate “judgment-free zone” and will teach its lessons to anyone awake enough to pay attention.

The other part of my agenda is to awaken girls to the genuine wealth imbedded in them. The forest does a good job of this, but I can help them notice it. I can show them how to nurture it and carry it with them back to the flat spaces at home, schools, voting booths, town halls, shopping centers. I can help point out their innate resourcefulness, their drive to learn, and their inherited resilience forged by their ancestors in forests like these.

Even though the veery trills its closing-time song at the wood’s edge every evening at camp, this class is never dismissed.





# “I WANT TO HEAR A STORY!”

by Tily Stanley

High Rocks AmeriCorps Volunteer, 2014

Given my comically short stature and ever-fading Yankee accent, I don't stand out much against the crowd while sitting alongside my newfound friends in our school's cafeteria anymore. We eat lunch, laugh at each other, talk about television or upcoming events, and swap unwanted food items for other subjectively more desirable ones in what I affectionately refer to as the “lunchroom black market”... just the typical behavioral fare that you might see at any other middle school across the country.

“Tily, tell us a joke!”

“Tily, come sit by me!!”

“Tily, sing the ‘cups’ song!!!”

“Tily, I want to hear a story!!!!”

I am endlessly bombarded with at least a dozen requests and two dozen more questions in less than thirty minutes. Sometimes I am pulled in so many different directions it seems to make my head spin. I may or may not vaguely recall stifling hyperventilation on my first day there. Before that initial visit as a mentor, I never would have dreamed that I would have been accepted by these kids so quickly! I remembered what middle school was like: the cliques, the bullying, the incessant torrent of daily gossip that could make or break one's reputation. This certainly wasn't an environment that I was itching to jump back into. Yet here I spend my Friday afternoons, surrounded by an endless flock of 7th and 8th graders and unmistakably loving every minute of it.

At this school in the southeastern region of West Virginia I have been assigned two mentees, a male and a female who are both in the 7th grade. I follow them to their shared classes and





divide my time between them as best I can. From helping them with problems they cannot solve in class to merely listening about their day to deescalating intense altercations, I enjoy an integral role in their school experience. While at times this program may be the most challenging aspect of my service, it is hands-down the absolute best part of my week. It almost feels criminal that I can count this time as service hours. Now I could certainly justify our presence with the rave reviews we have received from the staff. I could tell you that our program was touted to the Board of Education as the greatest addition to that middle school this year. I could even tell you that every teacher who has observed one of our wellness workshops (that we also happen to facilitate there) has lamented that our class is not yet a permanent school offering. But that quite simply wouldn't be doing our service commitment there any justice. I'd much rather tell you about the day that my male mentee poured his heart out to me, the day he found comfort in verbally expelling his inner demons and I finally bulldozed through that seemingly impenetrable emotional barrier he had built between us. I'd rather tell you about the mentee who has not been sent to the principal's office for a single offense since the day I started mentoring her. It has meant so much to her, me simply being supportive of her participation in after-school activities and checking in with her about the personal struggles she endures at home... because she just doesn't have anybody else in her life who does that.

How this program is counted as a success; that is where the heart of this story lies. It's more important to appraise the value of my time spent there by how I have been received by those mentees, like in how they are both continually competing for my help in class and how they are now both passing in math where they were previously failing. Part of me would like to take full credit for those things but, if we're being brutally honest here, I must admit that our program's accomplishments have little to do with any particular secret or trait of my own. There is nothing either unique or special about myself. My fellow AmeriCorps members are enjoying similar successes and receiving comparable praises. I have consistently seen those members lift the spirits of their own mentees, and those mentees have never appeared anything less than ecstatic by their mentors' presence. It doesn't take much to make a big impact; sometimes all one needs is a non-judgmental and understanding ear. You have no idea how much some of those students need that...an adult who will just listen to them and support them. What a novel concept! And it can all start in the battlefield that is a school's cafeteria, where alliances are forged or broken and the grand canyon between the popular kids and the social outcasts can be so easily bridged. No one could have previously convinced me that such a place would be where I would have my most widespread and powerful impact. Yet it is. Now I know better. Now I know that this is where I do my best "work".





# A “BIG IDEA”

by Founder SUSAN BURT

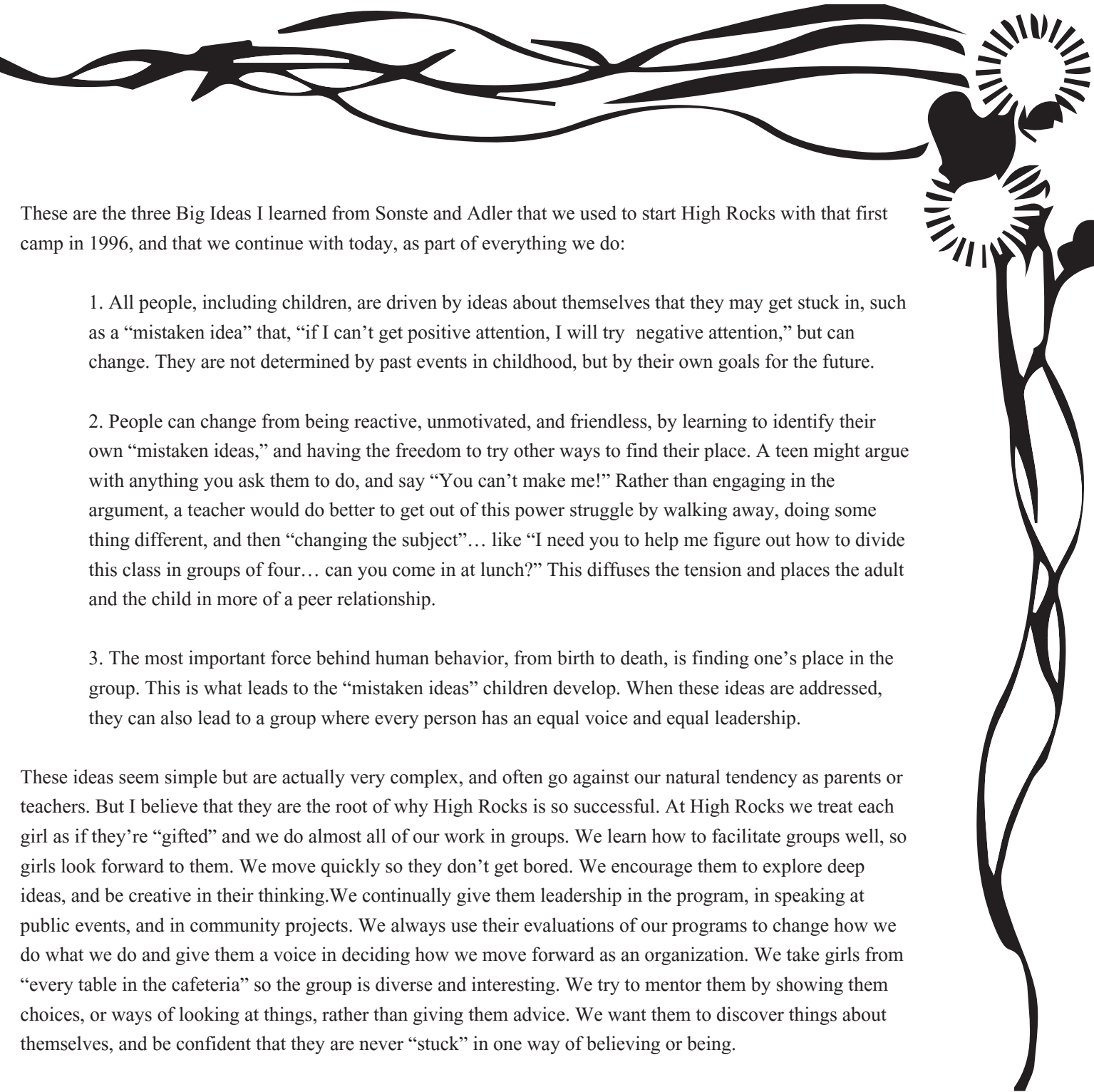
People sometimes ask me what the “big ideas” behind starting High Rocks were in 1995, when we incorporated as a non-profit and started planning our first camp. They ask less often now, because so many young women have come in as volunteers, or staff, and kind of take High Rocks for granted, at least as a Big Idea. We now have a building, a campground, close to 100 active teen girls, a year round program, an office manager, personnel policies, yearly audits, and all the trappings of another bureaucracy. But to me, High Rocks is not a bureaucracy, but a Big Idea; a wave that started with our first camp in 1996...and it just kept getting stronger. It was impossible to ever jump off that wave, and so here I am, still holding on to the surfboard!

A person is really lucky if they find a teacher that they need right then, and then work with that teacher to learn everything they can. I was that lucky when in my early 20s I met Manfred Sonstegard, a professor and teacher of Adlerian psychology. He was a master teacher and family counselor, and his philosophy of educating children was based on values I really believed in deeply. He had years of practice in developing methods that encouraged children to be independent in thought, motivated to learn, democratic in a group, compassionate to others, and hopeful about their futures. He also believed that child psychology did not have to be done in secret, but could be taught in public, in community forums with parents, teachers, and children.

Later I became a school teacher in Pocahontas County. I taught the Gifted Program here for twenty years, and I got to try out all these Adlerian ideas with my small groups of students. What was particularly exciting for me was finding ways to bring kids who wouldn't have been given a traditional “gifted” label into these groups, and seeing how well they responded to this different kind of learning. What was frustrating for the students was dealing with so many pervasive school system ideas that worked against motivating them. They weren't given leadership roles and lived in a world of pink slips and detention and rote learning and boredom. I was trying to help, but at forty-seven I was ready to hold my nose and “jump ship.”

I wanted to make this method of teaching available to the kids who didn't get to sit in the Gifted room, and to start a program for girls based on the wonderful ideas in Adlerian psychology that I had learned from “Sonste.”





These are the three Big Ideas I learned from Sonste and Adler that we used to start High Rocks with that first camp in 1996, and that we continue with today, as part of everything we do:

1. All people, including children, are driven by ideas about themselves that they may get stuck in, such as a “mistaken idea” that, “if I can’t get positive attention, I will try negative attention,” but can change. They are not determined by past events in childhood, but by their own goals for the future.

2. People can change from being reactive, unmotivated, and friendless, by learning to identify their own “mistaken ideas,” and having the freedom to try other ways to find their place. A teen might argue with anything you ask them to do, and say “You can’t make me!” Rather than engaging in the argument, a teacher would do better to get out of this power struggle by walking away, doing something different, and then “changing the subject”... like “I need you to help me figure out how to divide this class in groups of four... can you come in at lunch?” This diffuses the tension and places the adult and the child in more of a peer relationship.

3. The most important force behind human behavior, from birth to death, is finding one’s place in the group. This is what leads to the “mistaken ideas” children develop. When these ideas are addressed, they can also lead to a group where every person has an equal voice and equal leadership.

These ideas seem simple but are actually very complex, and often go against our natural tendency as parents or teachers. But I believe that they are the root of why High Rocks is so successful. At High Rocks we treat each girl as if they’re “gifted” and we do almost all of our work in groups. We learn how to facilitate groups well, so girls look forward to them. We move quickly so they don’t get bored. We encourage them to explore deep ideas, and be creative in their thinking. We continually give them leadership in the program, in speaking at public events, and in community projects. We always use their evaluations of our programs to change how we do what we do and give them a voice in deciding how we move forward as an organization. We take girls from “every table in the cafeteria” so the group is diverse and interesting. We try to mentor them by showing them choices, or ways of looking at things, rather than giving them advice. We want them to discover things about themselves, and be confident that they are never “stuck” in one way of believing or being.

Hope means the mental freedom to imagine happy, successful lives that will keep developing as long as they live. Overall, I believe that treating young people this way gives them that hope.





## DEAR HIGH ROCKS SUPPORTER,

My name is Casey Griffith. I've been in High Rocks for almost five years, though it feels more like a lifetime. Nothing can capture exactly what High Rocks means to me, and many others, but that won't keep me from trying. High Rocks is a different experience for everyone that has passed through here but all of them would agree that High Rocks is about educating, empowering and inspiring. This is true, but I also believe it's about testing limits, perseverance, and trying new things; at least that's what it has been like for me.

I was feeling confident about where I was going with this letter, as I had finished the first paragraph in no time...but then I hit a dead end. After nearly an hour of starting and deleting sentences, I went to the High Rocks website to find some inspiration. I ended up finding a short piece of writing that described a girl's first time at camp from years ago. I was in awe of how much I could relate to it even though she went to her first camp years before I did. It was full of all the iconic High Rocks' "firsts": the first time you meet Susan Burt and she says "I don't know you yet but I love you.", or the first time Sarah Riley says "You're doing this.", or the first song you learn at your first campfire, or the first time you realize that it's okay to let go sometimes. Even the girls that don't come back every year could still probably recount those moments and it's moments like those that keep people coming back. They remember what it was like to experience the magic of High Rocks for the first time and they want to spread it to everyone so that they can feel it too.

Through it all: seniors graduate, AmeriCorps' contracts expire, staff move on, and new girls arrive. I have seen many people come and go throughout my years at High Rocks and it is a bittersweet thing. I have made connections with everyone I have met here, and it is easy to miss them once they are gone. However, at the same time when someone new joins us, they bring their opinions, beliefs, and points of view with them. We must constantly make new connections with people, try to understand them, and try to be tolerant of them. This constant cycle of people makes High Rocks adapt and change with the times; and even when it doesn't always change for the better it's a game of trial and error. The girls have to make sure everyone knows what works and what doesn't. In this way, we will help mold High Rocks to fit our needs.

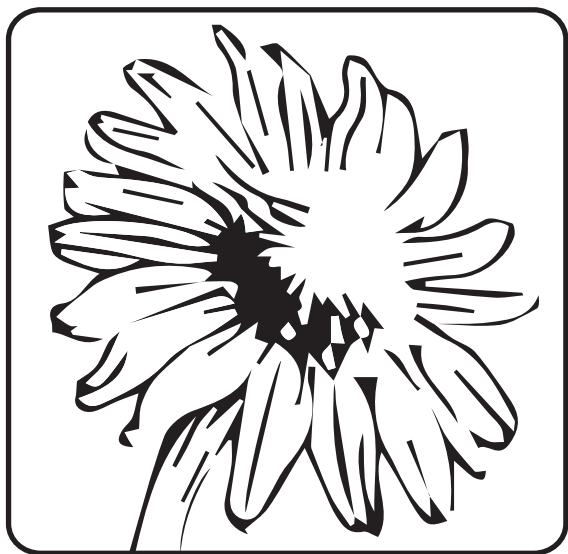
This also means that everyone who has ever entered High Rocks has helped shape the future of it, either directly or indirectly. We have a bond at High Rocks that is both indescribable and completely unique.

Even though the people change, the goal remains the same: to make the world around us better. There are many ways of doing this, but we do it by pushing the boundaries, trying new things, and sticking it out long enough to see it through. The only way to really understand what we do is to be a part of it.

We'd appreciate any help you'd be willing to give and even if you choose not to, we invite you to come by and see us. It's not always easy and to be honest, sometimes it's a pain to get to us, but we'll always make it worth your effort. Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope to see you soon.

Best Wishes,  
**CASEY GRIFFITH**  
High Rocks Girl, 2010





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AND YOUR SUPPORT!



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TO OUR VOLUNTEERS





Dream hard, work strong,  
and love like you'll never run out of it.

**Live in a big world.**

- Sarah Riley, Director

