



High Rocks


educate. empower. inspire.

December 1, 2016

Dear Friends,

The original dream of High Rocks was to raise a generation of young folks that could run this program for the generation after them. To actually DO that, we had to build a life pathway from those first tentative moments as a pre-teen camper to years later, when people as adults establish themselves as leaders in their fields—including the literal fields of the High Rocks campground. High Rocks grew up with our earliest girls, striving to meet their needs and challenges as we grew alongside them.

This year, High Rocks celebrates its twentieth anniversary. Isn't that amazing? This tiny dream that started on a mountainside in West Virginia has grown over the years to help educate, empower and inspire hundreds of people in a deep and meaningful way. Hundreds of people say that High Rocks changed their life in some real way for the better. You may be among them. I am.

I remember the beginning of High Rocks. I was there. It was a huge leap of faith, for the founders, for the supporters, and for the girls who showed up. I remember telling people that an investment in High Rocks was an investment in the future. We planted a seed through the work of High Rocks, and saw it blossom into strength, kindness, and confidence in the young women in whom we invested. From the beginning, we knew this investment would bear its full fruit in 25 years – as these young people took positions of leadership in communities, institutions, and families.

Now, more than half of our staff and board are alumnae of one of our programs, including our board president, vice-president, treasurer, and three of four of our program staff coordinators. I recently asked in a board and staff retreat to stand up if you were a High Rock success story. Slowly, in silence, nearly everyone in the room rose to their feet. My breath caught in my throat.

This new generation of High Rocks leaders continues to offer the magic of camp, the support of tutoring, and the opportunity of college trips to the young people coming after them. They're also dedicating themselves to reaching deeper into communities. They're creating AmeriCorps opportunities, building networks to support young people in Appalachia, and nurturing partnerships to help the other issues they have told us are critical: the arts, literacy, STEM, basic needs, community development, housing, water, drug recovery, human rights, local foods, stopping violence. These new leaders are holding on to High Rocks tradition while they're embracing the world.

This summer, we celebrated our founder's retirement alongside our 20th anniversary. This doesn't mean that the infamous Susan Burt will be gone, but High Rocks has reached a point where it can move forward on its own without being dependent on Susan. She gets to do whatever she wants, which is usually stopping in the office more days than not. She takes eager young teachers and leaders under



her wing, and her vision and values – about the absolute importance of holistically supporting individuals, of education and critical thinking, and of love and acceptance – remain core to who we are.

Twenty years later, we still recruit promising young people, selected for their gifts and leadership skills. They still reflect the demographics of our community; 70% receive free and reduced price school lunch (earning up to 185% of the poverty line) and over half would be the first in their families to go to college. We serve families who voted for Clinton, and families who voted for Trump. We serve families who are coal miners and environmental activists, families who are both, and families who are neither. We aim to recruit leaders from every table in the cafeteria. And we stick with them for a long, long time.

High Rocks is about challenging assumptions, including our own. It's about going outside of our comfort zones. It's about coming together to discuss and debate our differences, and then share a family-style meal. It's about growing and reaching, getting healthy, getting strong. It's about celebrating the mountains and the streams. It's about getting muddy, and tired, and laughing too much. It's about trying to understand race and class more deeply. It's about speaking up and speaking out, taking action in pro-active and positive ways. It's about talking face to face. It's about working hard to help other people. It's about long-term change, and creating pathways to civic leadership that might not otherwise exist for so many people with the intelligence and the heart to create true, meaningful change.



If you want to get involved, send a donation, mentor someone, or be a huge fan – please know how much we need you. Your involvement is critical. The High Rocks cannot exist without you, not this year, and certainly not for the next twenty years.

Help us hold on. And if you ever need a shot of faith in what's possible, come and sit down for a cup of coffee. Because if you want to move forward, whether you're ten years old, or forty, or sixty, there's a place for you at High Rocks, and an invitation to experience the joy of the journey that we create when we travel together, helping each other along. There are things we get wrong, and things we get right. There are dark days and days of light. There are times of trial and moments of great hope. And together, we can continue to invest in the young people who will help lead us forward to new days, with the hope and belief that High Rocks will last for a very, very long time.

I invite you to celebrate 20 years, honor Susan Burt's legacy, raise strong young women, invest in young people as leaders, and lay the groundwork for another 20 years. High Rocks is a song, a song we sing together.

I love you all, and I'm grateful to be on this journey with you. Hold fast.

Sarah Riley, Executive Director and one of the founders of the great crazy experiment that continues to be High Rocks