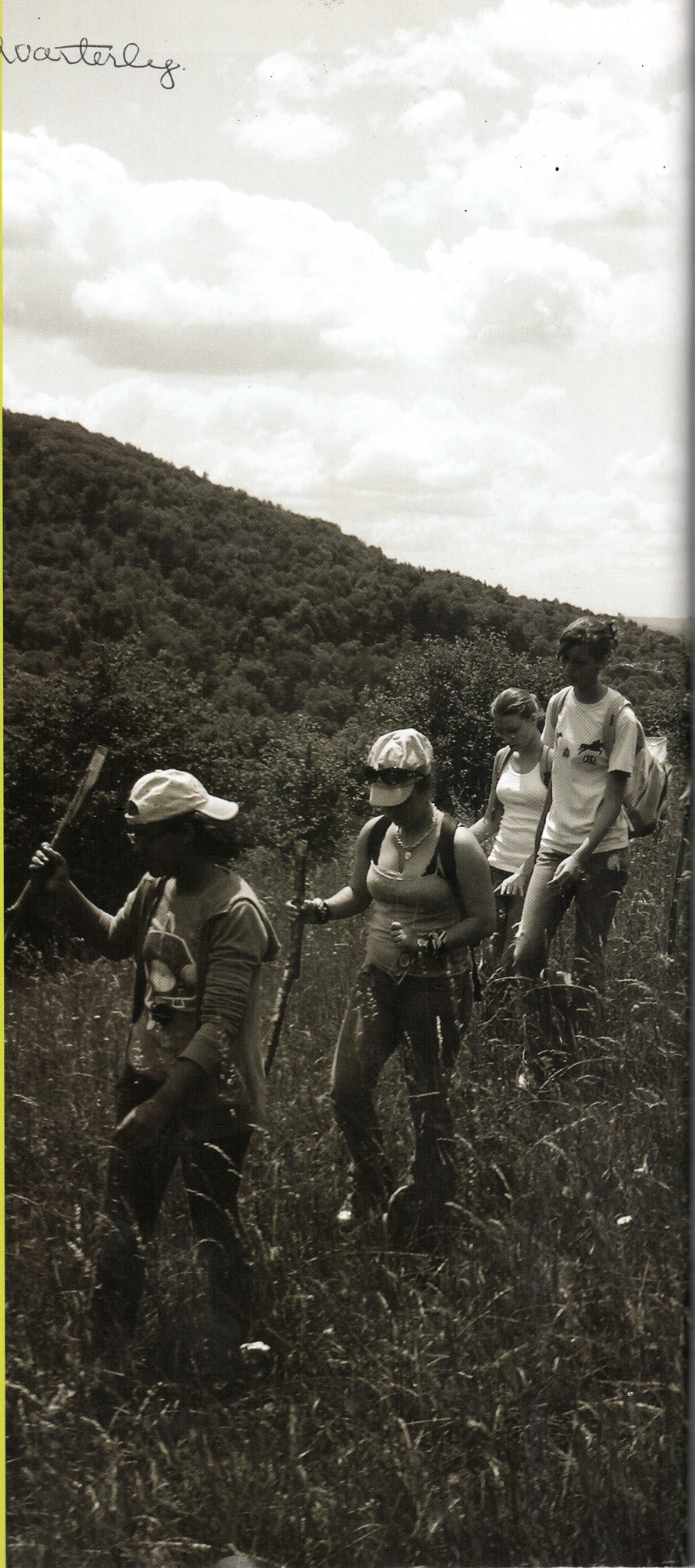


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Erica Marks, Co-Director of High Rocks Educational Corporation, is over 8 months pregnant, yet she's leading me up the steep hillside of the High Rocks campground. The heavy breathing starts, and I begin to feel as though I have been overestimating my physical stamina for years. Fortunately for my ego, Marks pauses for a moment. She's also breathing heavily, though not deterred in the slightest.

HIGH ROCKS

story by ED PLUCHAR





The campground consists of many structures, some used for classrooms, one for the cook's quarters, several three-sided cabins for the campers ("luxurious" buildings according to some alumni, who camped out in tents), and a clearing used for many events, including Nettle Fest, a kind of reunion for everyone with ties to High Rocks.

There are also the shower buildings, updated with another "luxury," a wood-fired water heater. You can almost hear the first class of High Rocks saying, "Girls today, with their hot showers and protection from the elements..."

With good reason: When Susan Burt founded High Rocks in 1996 with Sarah Riley, she brought 13 girls and some volunteers up that hillside just outside of Hillsboro, where they intended to camp for two weeks. Mother Nature's showers persisted, soaking their tents and dampening the spirit of the outing. Instead of amenities, Burt offered a challenge.

"Everyone down there thinks we're going to come down. Do we want to prove them right, or do we want to tough it out for the two weeks?"

Defining moments like that are rare. Perhaps those girls didn't realize the impact their decision would have on the future of High Rocks, or even on their own lives. Assuming they only thought about the following several days, the prospect of never-ending rain, of uneasy sleep, of deferred activities and constant discomfort, their answer, to "tough it out," becomes more impressive. It reveals and fortifies each one's innate character, which was Burt's purpose all along.

Later, back in the main lodge, one of the girls is helping to prepare dinner. She opens a drawer and takes out a peeler for some vegetables. A little later she grabs a bowl and pastry blender from the cabinet. Karline Jensen, office manager and a tutor for High Rocks, asks

the girl about visiting her brother on his military base while cutting up lettuce for a salad. Marks weaves herself seamlessly into the conversation, chatting casually about volleyball and summer plans.

"Are you going to Camp Steele?" Marks asks.

"Of course," the girl answers, adding that she is considering the filmmaking course.

Filmmaking is one of several courses a high school girl can choose during Camp Steele; others include women's history, entrepreneurship, and construction. Named for Virginia Steele, who donated 200 acres of land to help get High Rocks started, the one-week summer camp culminates in some form of a finished product, whether it's a short film, an essay, a business plan – or even the schoolhouse behind the lodge, built by High Rocks girls in years past.

Education of this sort – the hands-on, problem-solving, thinking outside the box sort – is the main thrust of High Rocks. It is an answer to the perennial problem Burt observed in her work as a public school educator: Girls would enter middle school full of life, as vibrant and creative learners, but on the way out, she noticed that those very same girls had diminished vitality, their aspirations lowered. This disappointing cycle seemed endless.

New Beginnings Camp, a girl's point of entry into the High Rocks community and programs, has broken that cycle for well over 100 girls. This summertime camp is also educationally driven, with strong elements of relationship building and reflection. Girls take on a variety of classes as well as extra-curricular programs like horseback riding, drama games, and painting.

This camp is facilitated with the help of junior counselors, who are graduates of Camp Steele. After leadership training, junior counselors become mentors for their "new younger sisters," and continue serving as role models throughout the year.

Here is a new kind of cycle which Susan Burt does encourage: High Rocks alumni are encouraged

to give back to the program, as interns, VISTA's, even as board members (currently four board members are alumni). Ultimately, the entire organization would be run by women who benefited from the High Rocks experience, well-trained to lead a new generation of girls to fulfill its potential.

It is unlikely that the organization will ever be run completely by alumni, however, because so many outsiders find themselves drawn in, compelled by the mission and methodology of High Rocks.

Lynn Creamer, Artistic Director at Carnegie Hall, is such a person. Creamer joined High Rocks through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, to incorporate artwork into the organization's curriculum, later taking on the role of office manager. Her two daughters are High Rocks alumni.

"Using women and peers as mentors is highly effective," Creamer says. "The program is really invaluable for leadership development."

While dinner preparations are wrapping up, two more girls arrive, joining the first girl for an overnight at High Rocks, followed by a clean up project along the Greenbrier River.

This project is part of the youth community action programs. Marks explains that it is a way for High Rocks to go out into the communities where the girls are from to work on service learning projects, often providing service in ways they identify as important.

Another group of High Rocks girls taught art classes in an elementary school where the teachers had reported their students access to the arts was being limited by the amount of testing required by the school. Marks says, "Our girls were excited to teach art and creative expression and it's such a good adventure in leadership." She adds, on a moment's reflection, "Really, they become super creative in how they're going to be leaders in that situation. To think on their feet, to be looked up to – it's great for all parties involved."

Tutoring is another on-going program offered by



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High Rocks. Once a week, girls from Pocahontas, Nicholas, and Greenbrier counties are invited to meet at the lodge to tackle their schoolwork together.

Community volunteers, often parents of High Rocks girls, are vital to this program, Marks says. They serve as tutors, cooks, and carpool drivers, essentially making the tutoring program possible.

Tutoring ties in nicely with the HERS program, or Higher Education Readiness Strategy. In order to prepare girls for higher education, High Rocks facilitates college visits, often to schools out of state. This fall, High Rocks girls going into their senior year will be invited to a retreat in Charleston to work with the University of Charleston, as well as some of High Rocks' board members and supporters of the program in the Charleston area.

"They can work on their applications, write their essays," Marks explains. "It's just a chance to be there to focus on those things."

Part of the push for this program, Marks explains, is the result of a study which determined that rural students begin thinking about college later than other students.

"Not that we believe every girl has to go to college to be successful," Marks says, "but we want them to understand why it can be important to get out and see the world."

Creamer agrees.

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lives," she says. "It helps you break out of whatever situation you're in, that you want to change."

If college is an experience in diversity, then alternative spring breaks are the primer.

Marks recently took some of the High Rocks girls on a tour of West Virginia's northern panhandle. "The idea was to see how the resources that are extracted from our area are used in this big industrial center," Marks says. Unfortunately for the group, the glass factories and steel mills were closed down. "It was like a ghost town!" Marks says. It was not a wasted trip, though, as their contingent was able to volunteer in both a soup kitchen and a community garden in Pittsburgh.

"The main value of that trip is that they're in an urban environment, and getting comfortable with people who look really different than them and talk really different," Marks says. "That'll be the seed that grows into more confidence, that enables them to navigate through different parts of the world."

Beginning with that first group of 13 girls in 1996, all High Rocks girls have set out on a hike up to the physical High Rocks, namesake of the organization, an overlook 4,264 feet in the air.

"It's a day-long hike," Marks says, explaining that the girls often struggle up the hill. Some may complain a bit and some usually wish to turn back due to rolled ankles or illness, but reliably they band together to overcome the obstacles, acting as human crutches or personal motivators for each other, and at last they come to the peak.

There, stretched out to the horizon in all directions, is the beautiful Greenbrier Valley, with its plains and mountains, its greens, browns, and blues. The effect—a change of

focus from the immediate and limiting to the vast and glorious—is analogous to the effect High Rocks seeks to have on girls' lives.

"On the way back to the camp, they're up for anything," Marks says. "They feel like they can do anything."

As the calendar turns again to the summer months, a new group of girls will prepare to engage the High Rocks mission statement: "To educate, empower and inspire girls, giving them the confidence to lead active lives and work toward the long-term betterment of our community."

High Rocks For more information

CALL (304)653-4860

or visit their website at www.highrocks.org



High Rocks girls with co-founder Sarah Riley, second from right, and her two children.