

## At Yosemite, urban youths discover wonders of nature

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21 inner city youths from the Para Los Ninos Youth Center in Downtown Los Angeles (Courtesy Photo)

The nights were a little chilly, but a campfire, blankets and sleeping bags kept students from the Para Los Niños Youth Center warm on a recent trip to Yosemite National Park.

"These five days were the bomb," Armando Siguieros, 13, wrote in an essay about his visit to Yosemite.

"I ate new things out in the woods like berries and apples that I picked myself. I also saw deer and bear poop."

For Siguieros and nearly two dozen other students, the five-day adventure opened their eyes to an entirely new world.

Part of an annual excursion to reward high-achieving students, the teens from the youth center on Skid Row explored the park's Crane Flat area and became acquainted with nature.

Yosemite Institute staffers helped the teens improve their problem solving and critical thinking skills through team exercises.

Before leaving the park, each student was asked to spend a few moments alone to write essays to Yosemite.

"I learned how to camouflage and develop myself with nature," Dulce España, 14, wrote in her piece. "My spiritual growth had a lot to do with trusting other people, like when we went to the spider cave and the lights were all off.

"It was an awesome experience."

The curriculum — which included geology, ecology and history — allowed the teenagers to explore the natural environment in ways that city life doesn't always allow.

"Some of these kids have never seen stars before because they live in the middle of the city where there are lots of bright lights," said Elena Stern, an executive with Para Los Niños.

"Sometimes the scariest noise they hear at night are sirens and gunshots. When they go up to the mountains, it's quiet and they hear wild coyotes."

Each student on the yearly trip goes only after they've worked on personal scrapbooks called "Road Maps to Success" that highlight everything from their academic profiles to their roles as leaders.

"The focus of the trip for them is to grow their mind, body and spirit," said Angelica Romero, the youth center's coordinator.

"The kids understood that every step of the way they would be asking, 'What are we learning?' 'What are we working on right now?' They were asked to reflect."

The center has a waiting list of up to three months, but once the students get in they are required to attend at least three times a week.

Once there they work on homework, receive tutoring and use computers. Their parents must also attend monthly meetings. The after-school program currently has 60 full-time participants.

For Luis Vasquez, 14, the trip brought up some fears, but in the end he learned new things.

"We started out by roasting marshmallows and telling scary stories," Vasquez wrote in his homage to the park.

"It really got cold once the staff put out the fire but then I could see more stars than I have ever seen in my life. I would do it again if I had the chance."