

# Into the Woods

## Outdoor Action program offers a rewarding college orientation experience

By Kathy Witkowsky

BLAIRSTOWN, NEW JERSEY

**I**T WAS a warm and rainy late August night in a northwest New Jersey forest, and things were not going well for Princeton University junior Scott Welfel and Princeton sophomore Aiala Levy. As volunteer leaders for Princeton's Outdoor Action frosh trip, an optional orientation, they were trying desperately to make this six-day camping experience a pleasant one for the eight freshmen assigned to them.

After all, this was the first official activity as Princeton students for these 17- and 18-year-olds, and an opportunity not only to learn about the outdoors but also to

***“Part of the uniqueness of wilderness orientation programs is that you are so dependent on everybody else.”***  
—RICK CURTIS

bond with each other and boost their self-esteem. The idea was for them to start the school year with a support system in place, feeling good about who they were and what they had to offer. Such wilderness orientations have become commonplace at colleges and universities throughout the country. With about half the incoming freshman class participating, Princeton's is



Rick Curtis, director of Princeton's "Outdoor Action," organized 69 trips, in eight states, for 548 frosh this summer.

among the largest.

Scott and Aiala (pronounced "EYE-la") had been through many hours of training to ensure that this orientation would be successful. But from the despairing looks on their group members' wet and dirty faces, they were failing miserably.

Bad enough that the group had slept poorly the previous night, crammed next to each other on a tarp and kept awake by an endless procession of daddy-longlegs that crawled over them. And that they were all sweaty and tired from a seven-mile hike earlier that day. And that it had been more than 48 hours since they'd been able to shower, change their t-shirts or use their cell phones, which they had surrendered to Aiala when they packed up back on campus.

Now it was pouring, they were soaked and hungry, their campsite was a sea of mud, Scott couldn't get the camp stove to stay lit, and their makeshift tent—a blue plastic tarp strung between two trees—was leaking. They seemed to have completely forgotten about their group's "full-value contract"—the orange-and-black plastic football on which they had each written one positive quality they hoped to contribute to the group and one goal for the week. A staple of the Outdoor Action frosh trip, full-value contracts can be signed on other objects, such as Frisbees, but the purpose is always the same: to serve as a tangible reminder of group and individual goals.

Emily Moses, a gregarious blond ballerina from Farmington Hills, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, had written on the football: "enthusiasm" and "tough it out." Now she was in tears. "There are puddles in the tent!" she sobbed. Alfredo Robles, a shy, soft-spoken young man from Pico Rivera, California, outside of Los Angeles, who had barely eaten since the trip began, blurted out what everyone else seemed to be thinking: "I want to go home!" So much for "learning to live without meat," or the "relaxation" he'd hoped to add. ("Make sure to write this in your article," he implored. "Do not go outdoors!")

Their faces brightened considerably when Aiala suggested that perhaps the group could spend the night inside the dining hall of the Princeton-Blairstown Center, the summer camp whose grounds they were on. They immediately began collecting their sleeping bags to make the quarter mile trek there.

But then Scott, who had stepped away from the group to phone his boss' office back



A group of Princeton frosh buckles up for the "high ropes" course, part of the outdoor orientation program.

at Princeton (group leaders all have cellular or satellite phones in case of emergencies), returned, looking chagrined: His call had been greeted with derisive laughter. A leaky tarp, he had been told, did not qualify as an emergency. So he had rustled up two extra sheets of plastic from the summer camp, and even though they weren't big enough to cover the entire length of the group tarp, he hoped they would stem the worst of the leaks.

Scott, a sweet and lanky 20-year-old philosophy major from Roseland, New Jersey, initially had been so excited about introducing his group to the outdoors that he had written "share the love," and "stokedness," on the toy football. Now even he felt defeated. Looking back, said Scott, "At that point I decided, the kids aren't going to like the trip, but let's just get through it, and I'll look at it as a learning experience."

So he did the only thing he could think of: He leveled with his group. "This sucks," he acknowledged. "But we have to deal with this."

And then something funny happened. They did deal with it. They slung the new tarps over the center of the old one. They made a little dam at the uphill end of the ground tarp so it would prevent any more water from flowing in. Rearranged their sleeping bags and pads, crowding them closer together into the driest section of the tarp. And then they took cover, fortifying themselves against the damp, at Scott and Aiala's insistence, with peanut butter, tortillas and trail mix.

When the rain let up a bit, Scott managed to light the stove, and even though the green peppers and onions he sauteed were covered in flecks of dirt, everyone—even Alfredo and Emily, who by then had apologized for her meltdown—emerged from the tarp long enough to have a chicken fajita. Afterwards, without being asked, they all helped lug the nylon sacks filled with food to a spot several hundred feet from the campsite, where they hoisted the sacks high overhead, out of reach of black bears and other forest critters. The

rope was so wet it required a group effort to get a grip on it, but there was singing and laughter as they tugged in unison.

And that was when everything began to shift. By the next morning, the group's mood was as sunny as the weather, which had completely cleared up. A short hike that day in Worthington State Forest provided the setting for a number of amusing riddles and other group games. At a lunch spot on the trail they treated a group of backpackers, who were on a similar wilderness orientation trip from rival University of Pennsylvania, to a spirited rendition of "Ride That Pony," one of the many silly songs Aiala and Scott had taught them.

Afterwards, Aiala and Scott addressed a more serious topic: alcohol, a subject Outdoor Action (OA) leaders are encouraged to talk about. A study conducted in 1998 indicated that the trips can help give freshmen a more realistic view of drinking on campus, so that they do not feel compelled to keep up with an imaginary and

***“It's not that I like doing things that are scary, 'cause I totally don't. But it helps me to see how far I am able to push myself.”***

—FRESHMAN LIZ MALTA

false social norm.

Both non-drinkers, Scott and Aiala emphasized that it was possible to have a social life that didn't center on drinking.

It's true, Scott said, that much of Princeton's social life revolves around "The Street"—the colloquial term for Prospect Street, home to the school's venerable eating clubs, which host parties featuring free beer. "Freshman year, I was completely overwhelmed by the amount of drinking at Princeton," Scott acknowledged. But he warned his group not to get pressured into over-indulging. "Don't feel like everyone's

going there and getting plastered," he said. "There's stuff for everyone at Princeton," he added, including plenty of activities for non-drinkers.

That came as a relief to most of the group, including Paul Kompfner, a surfer from San Diego, California. "It's nice to know that Scott and Aiala don't drink and don't have a problem," he said on the hike back.

By the next morning, Emily reported that she had slept "great," a relief since she thought she might be fighting off one of her routine migraine headaches. Alfredo, whom the group had taken to calling Alfie, said he was having fun, now that he had gotten a handle on his all-consuming desire for a shower.

All told, Scott said, in an interview two weeks after returning to campus, "the trip

***Outdoor Action leaders are encouraged to talk about alcohol. The trips can help give freshmen a more realistic view of drinking on campus.***

turned out absolutely amazing. Everyone loved it." Since then, he said, the group had gotten together for several "reunions," and many of the individual group members had been hanging out together on campus.

"The trip has definitely helped me settle in at Princeton," freshman Kristen Molloy of Long Island wrote in an e-mail the first week of classes. "Before the trip, I didn't know anyone at Princeton, but now I have a great group of friends."

Kira Schiavello, of Saddle River, New Jersey, agreed. "The OA leaders have helped me adjust to college so easily because they shared with us everything we

should know, and are still there to answer any questions we have," she wrote. And though she dwelled on the "horror stories" when she described the trip to her parents, she would definitely do it all over again, she said.

Even Alfredo gave the experience positive marks. "I made lots of friends and learned to appreciate the luxuries I often take for granted," he wrote in a post-trip e-mail.

None of this surprises Rick Curtis. For 24 of its 30 years, he's been the director of Princeton's Outdoor Action program, and has watched as its frosh trips grew in popularity. This year, he organized 69 trips for 548 first-year students (slightly less than half the class) and another 186 upperclass leaders, who were sent out to experience the outdoors in eight Northeast and mid-Atlantic states. Each group is composed of eight to 12 freshmen, and two or three upperclass student leaders. The trips cost \$420, but about a quarter of the participants were awarded some scholarship money.

Sure, students can—and do—make friends on campus, said Curtis, a 1979 Princeton graduate. But the immediacy of the outdoor setting helps strip away pretenses and forces the students to engage with each other on a far more intense and intimate level than they would normally.

"The challenge and hardship part of it helps bring the group together," said Curtis. "Part of the uniqueness of wilderness orientation programs is that you are so dependent on everybody else. Somebody next to you is carrying the stove, somebody else is carrying breakfast, somebody else is carrying the tarp."

Those friendships can reduce the anxiety that freshmen often experience when they start school—anxiety that is exaggerated at a place like Princeton, Curtis said. "Because it's a high-pressure academic environment, people are very nervous," said Curtis. "They wonder, 'Am I going to be



***The six-day outdoor orientation program helps Princeton University frosh meet new friends and build self-confidence.***

able to cut it here?" Through informal discussions as well as organized group activities such as "fear in a hat," in which participants anonymously write down a fear for the group to discuss, they learn that their concerns are not so unique, he said.

That was exactly what happened to 18-year-old Liz Malta of Ocean Township, New Jersey, a self-described "girly-girl" whose upbeat, outgoing nature and ability to laugh at herself belied an underlying insecurity. Like virtually all of her Princeton classmates, she was a stellar high school student. Still, she said, "I was nervous at first about meeting all these crazy genius people." Her Outdoor Action trip helped put those "crazy geniuses" into perspective. "It was really a great equalizer," she said. "These people are really down to earth. They too freak out when they see a spider. They too are freaking out about not getting to shower."

And she heard other things that she found reassuring: Her OA leaders encouraged her not to take on too much academically, not to be intimidated by her professors, and not to be too disappointed if she didn't make all A's—an idea she was having a hard time getting used to. Still, she said, it was good to hear it from people she respected.

The trips vary in terms of their difficulty. Some backpacking groups hike as many as eight to ten tough miles in a day, with packs that weigh 50 to 70 pounds; the canoe trips cover eight to 20 miles a day. Some trips combine backpacking with a day of rock-climbing.

Other trips, like the one that Scott and Aiala led and that Liz Malta was in, are less strenuous: These trips are based on the grounds of the Princeton-Blairstown Center, a summer camp in Blairstown, New Jersey, that is affiliated with the university. They were added in 1998 to appeal to students who might be reluctant to sign up for the more arduous itineraries, and include a variety of activities, such as hiking, group games, rappelling, a high ropes

course, and a day of outdoor community service.

But even these easier trips present challenges. Mid-week through her trip, for instance, Liz Malta had yet to pee in the woods, preferring instead to use the portapotty near her group's campsite. Neither had she given up her mascara, which she tried to apply surreptitiously.

She never did give up the mascara (though she did have to endure some teasing from other group members when they discovered her secret). But she did pee in the woods—once. In keeping with the program's Leave No Trace philosophy, she

***"The trip has definitely helped me settle in at Princeton. Before the trip, I didn't know anyone at Princeton, but now I have a great group of friends."***

**—FRESHMAN KRISTEN MOLLOY**

also learned to routinely eat food off the ground, no matter if it meant swallowing some dirt, too.

And even though it brought her to tears, she managed to complete a tough high ropes course that required her to climb up swinging tires, then walk across a wire strung between two trees.

"It's not that I like doing things that are scary, 'cause I totally don't," she said. "But it helps me to see how far I am able to push myself."

That's by design. The hope is that she will be willing to bring that same attitude to her life at Princeton.

"I think the most important thing we try to teach our frosh is to experiment—with classes, extracurriculars, friends, etc.,"

***continued next page***



***Rajiv Ayyengr, an 18-year-old freshman from Menlo Park, California, struggles up a rock face, part of his "Outdoor Action" experience.***

## PRINCETON

from preceding page

OA leader Adi Hirshberg, a Princeton junior from North Woodmere, on New York's Long Island, wrote in a post-trip e-mail. "OA is just an example of facing a challenge, something new, experimenting, or whatever you want to call it. We try to teach them not to be afraid of experimenting because it's new. Try it, and then see what happens."

Curtis and others have long based their faith in these trips on the overwhelmingly positive anecdotal evidence indicating that they are effective in terms of helping freshmen form friendships and a social support system. Now more scientific evidence appears to back that up, said Brent Bell, di-

**Some backpacking groups hike as many as eight to ten tough miles in a day, with packs that weigh 50 to 70 pounds.**

rector of Harvard's First-Year Outdoor Program, which is nearly identical to Princeton's.

Bell, who is also a Ph.D. candidate in experiential education at the University of New Hampshire, surveyed more than 1,600 students at two Ivy League schools.

His analysis isn't complete, but preliminary results indicate that students who had participated in the schools' wilderness orientation programs reported having significantly more social support than those who had not, and also more than students who had participated in other pre-matriculation orientations, such as community service programs or pre-season athletics.

The trips also fill a second, equally important function, said Curtis: They're a vehicle to provide valuable leadership train-

ing and experience for upperclassmen.

Years ago, OA leaders simply took a first aid course and went on a backpack trip before they were sent out with their freshmen. Now they're required to take a 21-hour first aid/CPR course; a six-hour team-building and group facilitator workshop; a six-hour leadership and group dynamics workshop; and six two-hour workshops on the use of equipment such as stoves, maps and compasses. It culminates in a rigorous six-day leadership training backpack trip. Canoe and rock-climbing leaders also take specialized courses with professionals.

In addition, all OA leaders have to go through a two-day pre-trip refresher course that includes diversity training as well as alcohol awareness—a concern that OA training began to address five years ago. This year, leaders gathered in Dillon Gym for a presentation by a professional drug and alcohol counselor; last year they heard from a Princeton alum who had to drop out of school to go through alcohol treatment. Student leaders are urged not to glorify drinking and to remind frosh that there are numerous non-alcohol related activities at Princeton. A policy adopted last year goes even further: Because they are considered role models even after they return to campus, OA leaders are not supposed to serve alcohol to "their" freshmen—those who have been on their trips—anytime during the coming year.

The idea is that, while leaders teach "Leave No Trace" skills in the outdoors, they should "Leave a Trace" when it comes to their freshmen.

The message was dramatically underscored just before the freshmen arrived, as nearly 200 OA leaders sat on the gym floor, surrounded by camping equipment and anxiously waiting for Rick Curtis to open the front doors and let in the crush of students gathering outside. But before he did, Princeton senior Tim Churchill, his face half-covered in blue paint, stormed into the gym as music from the movie "Braveheart" blared over the sound sys-

tem. Clad in a kilt and carrying a plastic battle axe, he addressed the OA leaders from a balcony.

"Sons of Princeton," he began, as his classmates cheered his Mel Gibson imitation. In a speech adapted from the film, he exhorted them to lead, concluding with this thought: "And dying in your beds, many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that, for one chance, just one chance, to come back here, and tell our enemies that they may take our lives, but they may never take our freshmen!"

It was a humorous riff, but the real point—that the OA leaders were undertaking a huge responsibility—was not lost on them.

Scott Welfel, for instance, was so nervous about the coming week that on the bus ride to the campsite, he said, "My stomach was in knots. I was physically getting ill."

His worst fears appeared to be coming true when the tarp started leaking and the group started to panic, which in turn caused him and his co-leader, Aiala, to panic as well.

Looking back, he said, "The tarp leaking wasn't a big deal; kids' tarps leak all the time. Our approach was a big deal," he said. Still, he said, "I think I learned a great deal—that you have to be cool when shit happens!"

And shit does happen. In the past, numerous students have broken bones; and in 1989, one student was struck and killed by a car as he crossed a road to set up camp. Last year, most of the groups had to contend with six straight days of rain; several abandoned their trips for a night to dry out at nearby motels. This year, said Curtis, three groups got lost and had to be met by support staff and shuttled to their correct hiking trail, and 22 freshmen had to be evacuated for various medical reasons ranging from cuts to hot water burns to sprained ankles. One of those students suffered a serious anaphylactic reaction.

And twice a group returned to its campsite at Blairstown



**Alexis Tucker, of West Orange, New Jersey, tackles rock climbing as part of the "Outdoor Action" program.**

to discover that a black bear had gotten into the food bags, which apparently had not been hung far enough out of reach.

That made for a couple of tense nights for the group's co-leader, 20-year-old Adi

**Alfredo said he was having fun, now that he had gotten a handle on his all-consuming desire for a shower.**

Hirshberg, who also found herself frustrated by other issues that came up during the week, she said. "Looking back, I don't think I handled the stress too well," she wrote in a mid-September e-mail. But, she added philosophically, "That being said, OA is a time for leaders to learn about their weaknesses, and I think the trip brought out a lot of mine."

Still, her group loved the trip, she said, and so did she. "The best part of being an OA leader is just easing the transition for the frosh," she wrote. "They've e-mailed me numerous times this week with concerns about classes and extracurriculars and other advice, and it's great for me to be able to help them." ♦

*Kathy Witkowsky, who also wrote about the Air Force Academy in this issue, is a freelance reporter in Missoula, Montana, and a frequent contributor to National Public Radio.*



**Student leaders of the orientation groups, and freshman participants, gather in Dillon Gym, on the Princeton campus.**