

[ACTION]

Better Than Peak-Bagging

Big City Mountaineers teaches teens to summit the metaphorical mountains of their lives.

Veronica shares a bedroom with four siblings in her family's two-bedroom apartment, and although she's lived within sight of the Rockies her whole life, the 16-year-old has never set foot in the mountains. With a combined income that barely supports the family, her parents have neither the time nor the money for life-changing vacations. That's where Big City Mountaineers steps in.

Big City Mountaineers (BCM) works with under-resourced urban teens like Veronica. The nonprofit, founded in 1999, aims to enhance children's lives through transformative outdoor adventures like its core offerings in Colorado and California: seven-day backcountry expeditions that include summiting a mountain.

On her first day out with BCM, Veronica suffered from acute headaches, withdrawal from her at-home routine of drinking a 2-liter bottle of Coke every day. In the wilderness, the only option was water, and she had no choice but to let her body work out its caffeine addiction. Veronica's trip leader also remembers the teen's fear on her first night—she'd never slept outside before—and Veronica's realization and appreciation of wilderness offerings she'd never experienced. On a 20-minute hike to filter water at a stream, Veronica chatted about school and boys the entire way. But as she knelt to purify the water, the teen stopped talking, looked up at the trees, and smiled. "I've never heard quiet like this before," she said.

Big City Mountaineers is based on the idea that taking concrete-jungle-adapted kids outside of their comfort zones allows them to interact with one another in new ways. Ideally, they'll come out of a wilderness experience able to see themselves and their relationships with others in a new light. In



Stopping to smell the flowers on a BCM trip in Yosemite

addition to providing the outdoor experience, BCM sets up a 1-to-1 ratio of teens to mentors and keeps the groups small, with just five teens per trip. This gives participants the opportunity to talk to adults in ways they maybe haven't before. With 45 to 50 trips each summer, BCM reaches up to 250 youth per year.

Transformation for the teens comes not only through the mentors and the setting, but also the duration of the trip, according to Hillary Harding, BCM's marketing and event manager. "A week is too long for them to just shut down," she says. "Their cell phones don't work out there; they have to hike and be around the same people every day. They end up having to take the journey, whatever that means for them."

For most, the highlight of each trip is the mountain—it might be an unnamed 12,000-foot peak, or one of Colorado's 54 peaks over 14,000 feet. Near the end of the week, the group sets up a base camp for a true alpine summit attempt. Harding says the climb tops off a true progression for each camper. "The trip allows them to be out there, have hardships, work through them, and then get up high on the summit," she says.

More learning and growth happen at the celebration dinner after the climb. The teens

are challenged to relate their high-country trek to their everyday lives. "We talk about things like making good choices," Harding says. "What would have happened had they not been prepared or hadn't brought water with them for the summit climb, for example? Or if they had just quit and given up when it got hard." Even though the wilderness setting is unfamiliar to them, the lessons these kids learn translate readily to "real life." In that sense, they're not any different than backcountry enthusiasts of any background: everyone takes something away from a mountain climb and these lessons stay with them long after their descent.

The magic of peak-bagging is part of BCM's effort with the kids, and it's also part of the business model that makes these efforts possible. BCM's biggest fundraiser, Summit for Someone, brings in 50-percent of the organization's operating budget by recruiting climbers to raise between \$2,900 and \$7,500 for guided trips to North America's most renowned peaks. There are 14 destinations this year including Grand Teton, Devil's Tower, and women's-only trips up Mount Shasta or Mount Rainier. The fundraising and summit push for those climbers to provide teens like Veronica with a chance for a summit of their own. Now that's a reason to climb high.

—Jayme Otto