

From Skidmore to AmeriCorps

Zoe Coleman is an English major at Skidmore College that will be graduating this May. At Skidmore, she's been a member of the soccer team, played for and coached the ultimate Frisbee team and is an active member of the Outing Club. She spends her summers leading wilderness trips for teens. In fact, this summer she's leading three two-week trips in the Rockies. There is an evident theme to the activities Zoe participates in: the outdoors. When talking about her interests, she says: "The natural world has always been a huge part of my life, whether backpacking with friends, camping with my family or leading day hikes with the Outing Club."

She attributes her love of the outdoors, in part, to her eight years of Waldorf education. For Zoe, the Waldorf educational practices were formative. In my school, we planted seeds to learn about growth cycles rather than in a classroom through a textbook. This type of immersive, experiential education was beneficial for me as a student and individual."

Zoe volunteers at the Forest Kindergarten, the early childhood program at the Waldorf School. When asked what makes a Forest Kindergarten different from kindergarten at a public school, Zoe says: "the students spend their whole day outdoors: rain, shine, deep snow, they're playing outside." Zoe has been able to observe first-hand how this type of program influences the way children approach the world: "It's so exciting for me to see these tiny three-four year olds in their full rain-suit outfits saying, 'I fell in the mud this is so fun, let's do that again!' They are so resilient and creative. I see them take a log and turn it into a horse, and then a balance beam, and then a seat and then a drum; they invent in a way that a lot of kids are rarely encouraged to do."

Not only has Zoe been able to contribute to the school, but she has personally benefitted from her work as well. Namely, this experience has reinforced her understanding of the importance of the natural world: "Being in the outdoors you learn to be more independent. Students relate to each other in a different way where there is much more creativity and self-directed learning-- that experience inherently shapes your character." Zoe shares stories of how she has seen this self-directed learning in action: "The students will come up to me and ask me questions like, 'Why are these plants growing so much better than the ones over here?' I try to ask them prompting questions, such as 'Well, what do you think?' Then I watch them make all sorts of observations like, 'there's sunlight on the ones that are growing better.' There's this natural learning that just happens."

This experience helped shape her focus for her post-college job search. "I actually just accepted an AmeriCorps position," she shares, "I'll be working in southwest Colorado at the Montezuma School to Farm Program with Hispanic and Navajo populations. This program also focuses on the intersection of agriculture, nature, community and academia which is exactly what I loved about my Waldorf school experience. In this job, I'll be teaching principles of farming in both traditional and garden classrooms and, with the help of community members, incorporating traditional knowledge of the community." She doesn't yet know what age group she'll be working with, but she says: "I'm hoping for middle school because I think that's the age when people get disconnected from the natural world, and I'm hoping to encourage students to appreciate and engage with the outdoors."