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Word count 1012

Undergraduate Writing----First Place Winner

“Keeping It Wild”

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Years ago I created a list of things that make me happy, and though I've added some things since then, the three items that continue to top the list are love, music, and nature. It goes on to include mountains, walking barefoot on the grass, watching the stars, and imagining what it would be like if my family still had the farm. Contrary to the connotation of its name, “the farm” was anything but agricultural. There were a few cabins and a dirt road, but the rest of the property was field and forest. It was a thousand acres of wild, wonderful West Virginia land that occasionally saw my family and friends having good, clean fun, and even more rarely, hunters to keep the deer from overpopulating. That land is also the reason I choose to devote the rest of my life to helping preserve the beauty that the Earth has given us.

I always looked forward to the times when my father would come home after work and announce that we were going to the farm that weekend. My family lived in a suburban neighborhood in Northern Virginia, and while it was nice to have all my friends so close to me, I often grew tired of the asphalt and houses everywhere and welcomed the chance to run around in the woods for a few days. If I was lucky, my buddy Chris would be there with his

mother and Hank, who was almost like an uncle to me. Chris and I would climb trees, go on creek walks, or just explore the woods until it was time for dinner. We often came back to the cabin with salamanders or small snakes to show off to all the adults. They would let us play around with them for a little while, but then we had to go put them back where we found them so they wouldn't die. That was my first exposure to how fragile nature can be- that wildlife cannot live without the right habitat.

There are so many memories from that old farm, and I learned lessons there that will remain with me forever. It was where a few old friends first put a guitar in my hands. It was where my father taught me how to navigate in the woods. He would give me a compass and a list of directions that always led me to a small candy bar or a dollar bill hidden in a stump somewhere. He also taught me how to cook the perfect marshmallow over the campfire- rotate it slowly, slightly away from the flame to ensure a crispy golden brown outside and a warm, gooey inside. I learned how to improvise when I helped him create a makeshift outdoor shower with a wooden pallet, a few boards, a tarp, and a pump by the creek. He told me I couldn't use my normal shampoo and

conditioner in it because they had chemicals that would leak back into the creek and kill all the fish, which scared me because I sure loved to catch fish in the pond up there in the mountains!

The biggest lesson I learned up there was about balance in the ecosystem. My dad used to take the family deer spotting, which was hunting deer at night with a really big flashlight instead of a gun. At first I did not understand why the hunters couldn't be satisfied with just catching sight of the deer rather than killing them and was very upset with my father for letting the local hunt club use our property. He explained to me that if the deer were left to reproduce without anyone or anything killing some of them, there would be too many of them and they would eat all of the low plants in the forest and starve to death. A swift death by a bullet seemed much less painful than starving all winter, and I certainly did not want all of the plants to die, so I quickly accepted this explanation.

I may not have realized it at the time, but everything I learned in those West Virginia mountains created a foundation of knowledge and morals that I continue to use when I make decisions every day. My experiences there shaped my love of nature and my desire to keep it from disappearing. Surely

you can imagine how upset I was when my grandfather announced that he was selling the farm to a developer. I was only twelve years old, but I had grown so attached to that land that it broke my heart to imagine it filled with houses, devoid of the wildness I cherished so much. I began to despise every housing development, including the one I had lived in until I was nine years old. Even the ten acres my family moved to suddenly felt cramped as nearby developments started to close in.

I was afraid the world was soon going to turn into a giant suburbia and there was nothing I could do about it, but I found out just how wrong I was when I came

to Virginia Tech. I met a young man who had been volunteering and working at a state park for a majority of his life, and along with becoming one of my closest friends, he introduced me to the College of Natural Resources at Virginia Tech. I looked into it and was amazed at how many ways I could help save some of the few wild places left in the world. I tried studying wildlife science for a semester before settling on a major in Natural Resource Recreation, which I hope will take me into the park system so I can spend the rest of my life keeping the wild lands wild. Until then, I will occupy myself with making sure my grandfather does not allow anyone to develop the five

hundred and sixty acres of West Virginia mountain, forest, and lake that he still has!

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