

My name is Andreea Toader. I am 17 years old from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I am a Yosemite/Olympic Alcoa Scholar.

When I got the notification of my acceptance into this program, I was ecstatic. I immediately began to plan for the trip despite the fact that it was four months away. I was so excited to meet new people, immerse myself in nature, and study the subject that I would pursue as a career: the environment. Little did I know that this experience would be two-fold.

In the simplest of words, I found myself during those two weeks in Olympic National Park. Before this trip I had been shy and reserved, never the one to start conversations or to go outside of my comfort zone.

In this trip I saw the potential for a fresh start--a clean slate in which I could experiment on my social skills. But I never would have imagined just how easy this feat would be.

The other scholars were kind, inclusive, and interesting. Each person came from a unique background and each was talented in his or her own way. Some could sing beautifully. Others played guitar or netball or acted and sang in musicals. Still others were amazing artists. But the one talent that all 39 scholars possessed was irreplaceable: each scholar was loving. At Nature Bridge, I felt like I was part of a family. We laughed together, cried together, hiked together, and shared a love for nature together. This is what made everything on the trip worthwhile. This was the unanticipated blessing.

The experience I expected and received was the immense love I gained for nature and the environment. I recall how I laid down on the soft dirt ground after a long hike through the Olympic Rainforest and marveled at how the light penetrated around the dense canopy of the trees. I remember sitting on logs with my friends by a clear, cold river, looking up at the fog that engulfed the treeline, and talking and laughing for hours on end. I can vividly imagine the day we reached Anderson Pass; the cold air immediately hit us and we threw on coats and sat out for an hour in the brisk atmosphere, leaning on one another and singing and proud of our accomplishments. But, of all these wonderful memories, I think my favorite one was on the last day in the backcountry, when my group had quiet time and I sat on a rock by the river and reflected on my time spent in nature. I thought about the Australians, Hungarians, Norwegians, Canadians, Spaniards, Americans, and Icelandic people I now would call my life-long friends. I thought about the 40 miles I had hiked and the fact that I was now certain I would go into an environmental career.

And as I thought about this life-altering journey, my eyes closed to the mountains that stretched before me, my lips curved into a soft smile, and I was overcome with peace.