

My name is Abby Birch and I am a 17 year old 2019 Olympic scholar.

When I first learned that I was accepted into the Alcoa Scholars program, I did not think very much about it. I was in my junior year of high school and it did not seem like a very big deal to me. For months leading up to the trip I had just about everyone from my family to teachers and friends asking how excited I was for this amazing opportunity. People were confused when I told them that I had not given the trip very much thought.

High school has not been an easy time for me. I attended a small catholic school with only 15 other kids in total in my class. When it was time to decide where I would go for high school, my parents made the choice to send me to a massive public school, North Allegheny. I went very quickly from having 15 kids in my class, to 700. Another difficult adjust to that move was that I was the only eighth grader from my private school to go to this public school. I started my high school years alone in this new massive school. A place where I felt worthless and like an outcast. And that is how I spent my first three years of high school.

I spent the summer leading up to this trip worried that I would once again be an outcast among my peers. Though throughout my Junior year I finally adjusted to my school, made friends, and got straight As, I still felt as though I did not belong and I was supposed to be elsewhere. As the trip grew closer, my fears grew. I worried that I would not be able to connect with my fellow scholars and if I would be able to handle the physical requirements the trip demanded.

But the first day of the trip arrived. My friends and family said goodbye and I was thrown out of my comfort zone head first. And since then, I have not looked back.

With the first interaction I had with my fellow scholars, my fears were dissolved. An enormous wave of relief washed over me when we all began to chat, I knew in a second I was going to make friends that I would never forget. Our first few days at the base camp were some of the happiest I had in years. I finally felt like I was starting to belong somewhere.

Throughout the group's time in the backcountry of Olympic National Park, our first connections grew into bonds that could not be broken by the challenges that were thrown at us. While it was a seven mile hike with a gain of 2,000 elevation, a torrential and terrifying downpour, or a stove breaking, the group attitude never dipped. We all realized how incredibly lucky we were to be where we were. We had gotten the opportunity to meet new people from all over the world, see some of the most beautiful sights one could ever see, and we all had at least one night where we destroyed the others in card games. Whether it was encouraging another group member or one of our nightly standup routines, this group of teenagers from all different places of the world became a tight family. And I was part of that.

It is difficult to put what this trip truly meant to me into words. How do you explain a life altering event in a short essay? This trip made me realize how incredible and amazing I am. That

I am a leader and someone who can bring a group of strangers together, someone who people can trust and want to get behind, and of course someone who can tell some hilarious jokes.

This trip was a major test for me. That if I able to make new amazing friends in a single day, climb up a literal mountain with 50+ pounds on my back, and have trust and confidence in myself, that I am more than capable of finishing high school on a positive note and being able to tackle whatever comes after that with ease.