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## **My Stint in the Wilderness**

By LAURIE FROST  
[lauriejfrost@gmail.com](mailto:lauriejfrost@gmail.com)

### **Day 3**

My last morning in the Red Cliff wilderness therapy field starts with me and Steve Schultz, the media rep for RCA, leaving to go to the camp just over the hill. I feel kind of leery to leave "my boys," as I think of them, but I need to find some RCA girls around here to interview.

Yellow Badger comes to lead us to the camp just over the hill (an all girls camp, oddly enough - most of the camps are coed). I walk into a clearing and feel several pairs of eyes on me.

I'm dirty already, but not nearly as much as these girls. They introduce themselves, from Jessica (who's only been in RCA for eight days) to Silent Raven, a quiet girl whose hair is matted with dirt. She's been out for 96 days.

I turn to an olive-skinned girl on my left, whose long brown hair is plaited in two tight pigtailed. "What's your name?" I ask.

"My name's Kaylani," she chatters. "I'm part Hawaiian. There are lots of people who think I don't look Hawaiian, but I am. My mom was part Hawaiian. She always tells me, 'You have the body of a Hawaiian, don't let anybody tell you otherwise.' I don't know what my dad was, because I don't know who he is, exactly. I've been here about 20 days. Why are you here, anyway?"

"Kaylani," calls Yellow Badger. "You need to get back to work and roll your pack."

"Oh, OK," she says, a little forlornly, and tromps away.

Steve introduces me to Tray, a staff member who agrees to speak to me for a while about the girls.

"Kaylani, that you just spoke to, she's on separates right now." Tray says. "She'll talk to anyone to keep from being confronted with herself."

"Separates" is a Red Cliff-specific treatment where the student has to be removed from the group. They can't speak to anyone or even share the group's fire at night.

"Oh," I say, and look over at Kaylani. She's hunched over her bedroll, all the wind out of her sails as she half-heartedly rolls the tarp.

Tray looks at her for a minute, then turns to me.

"It's hard to hear her over in the trees, sobbing, but that's what she needs right now," he says. "She needs to be alone with her pain. When she can stand to hear what she has to say to herself, that's where the healing can begin."

This is just another Red Cliff philosophy I've been taught over these last three days. It's not just the traditional "Think before you speak" philosophy to keep you from saying something hurtful. It's a "Think so you can help yourself heal" philosophy ... one that I could employ in my own life.

Tray goes on: "In an all-girl group, things are different," he says. "Their motivation is different. In the all-male groups, the motivation is like a pissing contest. The girls just want to get back home."

When the group is packed up, we hike about a mile to Outpost, the meeting place and center of the field. There's an amphitheater there, and that's where "Shin Dig" is going to be. On the way, I talk to Kaylee, a 16-year-old redhead with a thick Midwestern accent and a ready smile.

"I've been here 76 days," she says. "I kept lying to myself and telling myself I was OK. It's like I was hypnotized with myself. When I would feel down or when my parents would get mad at me, I would get high or run away. I was lying to my parents and stealing money from them."

She speaks without reproach and without being defensive for her past actions. She's made mistakes, and she doesn't mind letting me know that.

"Honestly, if my parents hadn't sent me here and given me a reality check, I probably would've been dead by now, with the track I was on and the life I was leading," she says.

We stop for a minute in a creek bed, and she looks me full in the face.

"I never realized my friends were lying to me until I got here," she says, shifting her pack thoughtfully. Suddenly she chuckles.

"Actually, I never thought about anything until I got here."

Kaylee goes on to tell me about her little triumphs - her first fire, which took her 19 days to get, and her plan to get 100 fires and earn her "fire patch."

"At the beginning of the week, I only had 22 fires," she says, then straightens up proudly. "I just hit 50 yesterday."

"What would your old friends say if they saw you out here?" I ask.

"If my friends saw me here, they'd say I was crazy," she says. "But they'd think I was strong too."

We stop in a clearing just outside of Outpost and Kaylee sits down to make an "oatshake" for breakfast - oats and honey and powdered milk and cinnamon. She stirs her pot with a stripped-off piece of pine bark and I look at her quizzically.

"I lost my spoon," she says, grinning.

"Here," I say, "you can use mine."

"No thanks," she says. "I'm all right."

And she is all right. She's sitting in the dirt, barely in the shade of a shaggy cedar tree, spooning

down an oat shake with a rounded piece of bark.

"Mmmm," she says. "Delicious."

I figure this is as good a time as any to talk to Silent Raven. She's been out 96 days and is the establish veteran of the group. She was named Silent Raven Teaching in an Earth naming ceremony not too long ago.

Like Kaylee and other veteran students, she speaks freely about why she's at Red Cliff. She speaks with painful honesty, but she's not ashamed of her past.

"I was a drug addict and a thief," she says. "I stole from my mom and my grandma."

She tells me about how she came to Red Cliff, stubborn and unyielding as a brick wall. I can see it in her. She's a small girl, standing probably six inches shorter than I, but I can see a determinedly loyal and honest soul.

Silent Raven said she threw a shoe at Starlight Thunder's head, a staff member who was helping her at intake. She refused to do anything when she got there. She procrastinated for 50 days, she says. She got her first fire at day 48, and it lit the fire under her to continue, no pun intended.

This girl is brutally honest with herself, and it shows. That's probably why she experienced a major change in herself. She and her group went down in the kiva, the underground ceremonial chamber RCA built in the style of the ancient Anasazis, and she was given the Earth name Silent Raven Teaching in honor of that change. She had become another person.

"They named me 'Teaching' because I've learned from the mistakes I've made," she says. "'Silent' means I sit back and just look at things. Getting a name is the best feeling. I felt really proud of myself and real."

She drags a short finger through the dust at her feet.

"Not many students get to go down in the kiva," she says.

At that moment, Yellow Badger gathers up the group and asks us to follow him, but not to speak until we're given further instructions.

I don't know where we're going until we're at the mouth of the kiva. I have goosebumps as I descend the raw wood ladder into the coolness beneath the ground.

One of the staff reminds me to take off my hat as I sit, waiting for everyone to come down. I have my notebook in my pocket, but I can't bring myself to bring it out and spoil the reverence here. This is a sacred place.

Tray is the last to come down the ladder. He builds a fire and the kiva is filled with smoke. Smoke - that must be why my eyes are welling with tears. I nearly lift my hand to wipe them away, but I realize that I'm not ashamed to cry in front of these people. They are my friends, and they understand how I feel.

I won't go into all the details of the naming, as it is a very private ceremony, but Kaylee was given the name Prancing Red Fox. Yellow Badger hang a small leather bag around her neck with a

paper explaining why she has been given that name.

"Prancing Red Fox, you have been given a new name," Yellow Badger says.

The tears make streaky tracks in the dust on my face, but I still make no move to wipe them away. I have experienced a profoundly touching experience, and I don't want to remove the vestiges of it from my face.

The tear tracks stay with me long after I emerge from the kiva, long after Shin Dig, long after I recovered my car from the Enterprise offices and drive back to St. George.

As I lean over the steering wheel for the first time in three days, I feel a pang of homesickness, I guess. I have lived in another world, a world of honesty and caring and blatant soul-searching. And I'm not ready to leave it behind.

I think about Prancing Red Fox, I think about all I had seen, I think about "my boys" whom I stayed with for two days - Brian, Andrew, Charles, George, Hunter and Joel.

All of the sudden, I can hear Joel's voice in my head.

*"Bye, Laurie. We'll remember your visit fondly for a long time."*

When I get back to the newsroom, I realize just how unique my experience had been.

"Wilderness therapy, huh?" they ask. "Isn't that the 'hoods in the woods' thing? Kind of like boot camp?"

I smile a little wryly before answering: "No, not quite ..."

