HIGH MOUNTAIN INSTITUTE
FALL 2020
ELEVATING VOICES OF COLOR
This summer and fall have been full of many challenges and changes, both at HMI and in the world at large. Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we are grateful that Semester 45 is able to be on campus, thanks to much planning and hard work by faculty and staff. We are also extremely grateful for the opportunity to continue to engage—in person—in tough conversations surrounding racial inequality and injustice. As we keep learning and growing, the following newsletter is dedicated to uplifting and elevating the voices of people of color within our community—it is an honor to share some of the many different perspectives of those who care about HMI and the outdoors.

Our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and alumni families continue to inspire us with the many ways they live out HMI’s mission in everyday life. Speaking from the heart, listening with intent, and having thoughtful conversations are just a few of the many ways we see our community making the world around us a better place. We hope you are inspired, too.

THROUGH OUR LENS THIS SUMMER & FALL:

TO FOLLOW MORE OF HMI’S ADVENTURES, FIND US ON SOCIAL MEDIA
ELEVATING VOICES OF COLOR

This edition of HMI’s newsletter is about elevating voices of color and reckoning with the challenges of racism and injustice at our school and in the outdoor recreation world. Our school exists at the intersection of two primarily white spaces—indoor schools and the outdoor industry. We are dedicating this newsletter to alumni, employees, and friends of color in order to showcase and elevate the many different voices of people who care about HMI and find inspiration in the natural world.

For this newsletter, we reached out to people of color in our community and asked them to share honest reflections on their experiences at HMI and in the outdoors. We did not edit their submissions in any way, other than for grammar or clarity, and always with the collaboration and consent of the authors. We are deeply grateful to those who shared their stories with us, and all of you. Thank you.

HMI acknowledges the many imperfections in our past and present. We have committed to our own growth and improvement to ensure that our school is a true home to all people, especially those for who, by virtue of their race, ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic background, have not easily had access to the outdoors or to independent education.

Please visit hminet.org/diversity-and-inclusion for more information about what HMI has done, is doing, and plans to do moving forward to make this school a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive institution.

With gratitude,

Danny O’Brien, Head of School
(dobrien@hminet.org | 719.486.8200 x101)

Mo Copeland, Chair of Board of Trustees
Isaiah Thomas, Board of Trustees, Semester 8 Alum

OUR DIVERSITY & INCLUSION STATEMENT

The High Mountain Institute believes that both diversity and inclusion are essential to growth and learning. We all achieve our potential when each person in the community feels a true sense of belonging, and has the confidence to express their full self.

At HMI, inclusiveness starts with an intentional and affirming community. Creating such a community is our priority. We connect deeply to each other through classes, wilderness expeditions, and shared responsibilities. We prioritize open communication and honest conflict resolution. These efforts inspire us to build trust, to value diverging perspectives, and to build communities greater than ourselves.

Historically, however, outdoor programs like HMI have attracted largely white and privileged populations. At times, this has made it challenging for all at our school to feel fully part of our community. We seek to address these challenges at HMI by increasing the diversity of our students, faculty, staff, trustees, and advisers; by creating classes and activities that explore and reflect students’ identities; by expanding the cultural competence of faculty and staff; and by continually challenging the assumptions we hold.

We engage with this challenging work because we are committed to building an exceptional learning environment rooted in community—not just for some, but for all who seek to be inspired by the natural world.

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TIRED BUT HOPEFUL

By Isaiah Thomas, Semester 8, HMI Board Member

As we all know, life has been incredibly turbulent for the majority of 2020. Living in Los Angeles, where most establishments are still closed, and going to the beach is one of the few pleasures available to us, self-reflection has been something I’ve partaken in more than ever. As a first-generation, Christian, BLACK, bisexual identifying mid-thirties man, I am TIRED. While listing all of the contributors to my tiredness would fill this entire publication and then some, most salient to me is the racial animus in our country. I am scared for what has been unleashed in the country, and I cannot fathom how our youth are processing everything around them.

As a temporary escape, I revert back to my 17-year-old self in January 2002, when I became a member of RMS VIII (in today’s lingo, Semester 8). I was one of 30 students who came together that semester to create a new life; to connect with nature, to learn from each other, and to escape from the stereotypical hell that is High School.

Semester 8 was also the first semester post-9/11. Before I left for HMI, I had several worries. Having older parents, I was worried for their safety while I was gone, and they were definitely worried about me every day. My worries prior to leaving for HMI, however, were probably different from my non-People of Color (POC) cohort. I worried about being one of “the only” POCs in the remote isolated environment that is Leadville, Colorado. I was also nervous about fitting in with more affluent students from the private preparatory school circuit, as I came from a lower-income environment and did not show up to HMI with my own gear. While I certainly experienced many challenges during my time at HMI, the positives more than outweigh the challenges.

I have so many fond memories: making homemade pasta with my Cook Crew in the kitchen, learning how to use an avalanche beacon, and endless laughter in Who’s Hall. I appreciated being away from the hustle and bustle of the world in a structured environment cultivated to bring people together. While our multiple identities remained salient, living together, cooking together, studying together, and engaging in the outdoors together formulated a shared experience; something we all had in common with each other.

Fast forward back to 2020, and I reflect on where we are today. I have a unique opportunity to serve as a Board of Trustees member for HMI, bringing my alumnus experience alongside my experience as a higher education administrator to better the HMI experience for future students. There is a sense of magic to why HMI works, and why it plays such a positive role for all students. That being said, I do believe there is more we can do to support POC and other marginalized populations. While I had such an incredible experience 18 years ago, I want future POC to have an even better experience.

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I commit to working with HMI leadership to develop initiatives and structures that will contribute to a better supported student experience and a more diversely engaged alumni. Today, I am not a self-proclaimed outdoors enthusiast, and P&P seems quite foreign to me, but connecting with others who are different from myself is the foundation for my professional career and personal life. I believe in the power of HMI: the power to create and sustain inclusive communities that embrace inclusion alongside cultivating a connection with nature.
On the top of a mountain or in the middle of the wilderness, I find peace. In this place, away from electronics and duties and responsibilities, I find calm freedom. I get the opportunity to be myself, to express myself how I want to be perceived. Only the wind and the trees can judge me for who I am, and instead they feed my energy. They flow through me and around me. They connect me to the world. This place is a part of me. It is here, in the outdoors, where I understand my significance and insignificance.

In these moments of complete connectivity, I am the most distant and disconnected from my family and culture. My mother is a woman who prefers to be inside rather than outside. My grandmother has never even enjoyed joining my grandfather at the local lake for fishing trips. Especially for the women in my family this separation is cultural. Young boys and girls are encouraged to be outdoors as much as possible, but once these girls turn to women, we are expected to take care of the family, our work is designated indoors.

A matriarch in my family is the glue. This woman knows all family secrets, is respected by family members, and is the leader. She holds tremendous power because she is the confidant and knower of all truths. The matriarch changes the course of how children are raised, who the family will become. Most of all, the matriarch is the heart and soul of the family. It is because of the matriarchs in my family that I am who I am. As I grow, I dream to become a matriarch. Then how do I stay true to my energy, my peace, my self? To fill the role as matriarch in my family, one day I must master the indoors. I must take care of my family. To be at peace with myself, I must be in the outdoors. Do I sacrifice myself for the sake of my family? Will my life entail bouts of hiding from my culture to fulfill my own soul? *
THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT IT

By Wayan Buschman, Semester 33 Alum & Semester 45 Apprentice

I did not summit my first mountain until I was sixteen years old. This is not the strangest thing for many people but I was born and raised in Leadville, a beautiful place where nature is everywhere. I did not start taking advantage of everything the outdoors had to offer until HMI came into my life. Growing up in a Mexican family, we did have occasional cookouts at the lake, and went camping and fishing. This was all the exposure I would get to the greater outdoors. I learned that camping meant staying in a tent two minutes away from communal restroom facilities. I learned that I should only keep to largely visible paths. I learned that the mountains I saw daily were only for extreme athletes to climb. When I chose to apply to HMI and take a huge step out of my comfort zone, I learned I had to adapt those preconceptions to reality. I did not have to be an extreme athlete to summit Mt. Elbert or Mt. Massive. It was possible to spend 18 days (or more) in the outdoors with only a backpack. I learned that stepping off the path and creating your own can make a fun adventure and expose me to new beautiful parts of nature. I learned that the outdoors brought me peace and helped me ground myself when I disconnected from everything around me.

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STEPPING OFF THE PATH AND CREATING MY OWN

By Bianca Gonzales, Semester 39, Member of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Subcommittee of the Alumni Council

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Being a person of color in the outdoors is intimidating at times. I still feel like I am somewhat new to the outdoors world and am still playing a game of catch up. Certain tools, words, or activities still confuse me. However, HMI helped me learn that the outdoors does not have to be a closed door. Current stereotypes of who the outdoors is for are meant to be broken. Anyone can take advantage of the beautiful world around us.
Being introduced to nature as a young child has shaped my love for the natural world. The natural world: wilderness, wildlife, my happy place.

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I constantly have to examine where I can travel and with whom. I consider this to be a safety skill, not in the sense of remembering to pack my ten essentials or enough water, but my actual safety in a realm my white counterparts may not understand. Systematic forms of oppression limit access to folks of color in outdoor recreation. We see this same messaging in our social media. Representation of Black people in outdoor spaces is very hard to find. There are many Black people who like to hike, but we are often unseen or hidden under the stereotype “Black people don’t hike.” I’ve joined two Black Hiking groups (a local group with over 600 members, and a national group with thousands of members) online. I joined these groups because I can be in a community of support with people like me, who enjoy doing what I enjoy—which can be very healing. Together we are breaking the false narrative that outdoor recreation is only what white people do.

Though changing this narrative combats racism, it is still rooted in outdoor recreation. Racism impacts my access to trails. I constantly have to examine where I can travel and with whom. I consider this to be a safety skill, not in the sense of remembering to pack my ten essentials or enough water, but my actual safety in a realm my white counterparts may not understand. As I research a trail, I always research the town I will be in. I never hike unknown territory alone. I intentionally hike with a white ally on trails that are in predominantly white, rural areas, where it is rare to come across a person of color. I always let five different people know where I am going, my license plate number and what time I should be expected to be done. I overtly demonstrate hiking etiquette, even if other persons on the trail do not acknowledge me. Despite it all, I am out here hiking throughout the Pacific Northwest, because Black people do hike.

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A COMFORT ZONE

BEYOND MY ALTITUDE

By Brandon Nesmith, Semester 43

I remember first hearing about HMI. I walked into a small office and my Young Eisner Scholars (YES) program directors brought up this semester school to me and I instantly said I was interested. I always wanted to leave the city and go away for school, and this was my opportunity. After I applied, I didn’t really look into it and do my research, I just formed an imagination off of a friend’s experience. When I arrived, it was a culture shock for me as the diversity was very small and I instantly thought of my frightening experiences when surrounded by a majority of white people. While playing baseball tournaments in Rhode Island and upstate New York, we had racist names hurled at us constantly as we would hope to make it out safe. Coming from the city, you consistently hear about shootings around the world or in your neighborhood, and African American interactions with police, formally known as police brutality as they always took a turn for the worse. As I stood in the parking lot, I came to the ultimatum that this would either be a frightening experience, similar to my old baseball tournaments and walking into neighborhoods that were gentrified. Or this could be the greatest experience in my life, changing my view of what the media portrays that all whites perceive blacks as threats. Looking back on it, first expedition really wasn’t that bad, but at the time, I thought it was the worst decision of my life. Spending 18 days in an environment I had never been in before, I felt miserable. I didn’t think it was for me, I didn’t think I would survive as it isn’t common for people like me to go backpacking. Carrying such a heavy pack, being at such a high altitude, it was a complete difference for me. But the unconditional love and support I received from my expedition group helped me keep going. Although we didn’t know one another to the fullest, we all felt that we were struggling and could support one another through such a time. It allowed us to be vulnerable with one another and helped me become comfortable. On the last night of the first expedition, we all slept under the stars with one another laughing at our memories over the past two weeks and how dramatic we were. This first expedition set a tone for me throughout the semester and helped me realize how I can make it different from others. It helped me realize what I brought to the table. During my time in the Sawatch mountain range, I wrote lots of poetry, but most importantly, stayed myself and was accepted for it. Throughout the semester I was able to stay the same, and even better myself in a way as I became more vulnerable with my peers. This eye-opening experience is something I would partake in all over again. I shifted from being this city kid that was nonchalant and always tried to remain isolated if I wasn’t in a small group, to someone that found a love for the outdoors along with people I have unconditional love and support from.

HMI JOURNEY

By Brandon Nesmith, Semester 43

From New York to Colorado yeah I’m always on the road
Friends back at home wondering where did Brandon go
But now I’m out here stepping out my comfort zone
In a welcoming community, this is where I want to be
As I’m walking through town buying souvenirs and groceries.
And yes I turned into a wilderness man for 18 days
With a trowel in hand, with my kitchen group figuring out a meal plan
Sitting in circles looking at stars, playing games,
And then a deep meaningful conversation begins to rain
Showered with thoughts and ideas and experiences about happiness, pleasure, and pain
As I couldn’t breathe or cramps in legs had me thinking, “Me here, couldn’t be.”
But climbing Hope Pass and Mount Huron help me realize it’s never too high of a dream
Cause I’ll get there through all of the struggle and pain
And the little motivation that sits next to my name
As I wake up and shiver, dust it off then run
Stop and look up and admire the warmth of the Sun
I know Nathan is somewhere sitting thinking “That’s Huge”
But learning that I got accepted here was big news
Now we dancing in cabin to DaBaby’s Suge
As I play music and we sing along
And set ablaze fires that last all night long
Our days here will eventually end, but I don’t want to picture that scene
As family will never be separated, through rough patches to funny memes
But you should know that I’m glad with you being apart of my team
And we’re ending this performance with a power clap on three
1,2,3***
The High Mountain Institute engages students with the natural world. Our school boldly unites rigorous intellectual inquiry, experiential learning, wilderness expeditions, and shared responsibility in a strong community. Our students realize their potential—as leaders, independent thinkers, and thoughtful citizens.