



# *experience* LEARNING

20 IMPACT  
22 REPORT





Friends,

I have to admit it is a little difficult to remember the feeling of uncertainty that I know permeated 2022 as we look back, at the end of September of a very different year. 2020 seems now like a year of endurance, '21 a year of flexibility and opportunism. I believe our story of 2022 is one of risk taking, and I think a positive one all told; of hope for the future and a team rallying together to accomplish some major things.

Our spring season was still heavily impacted by pandemic fears, and even as we started building our new yurt, the Altai, in June, life felt precarious. We staffed up for a busy summer, then again for our first full fall season of school courses since 2019. The uncertainty was not so much in whether or not we could build that yurt, or whether or not we could run successful programs. We struggled instead with the same issues everyone else did. The high cost of materials. The uncertainty of public health measures. A tight labor market. Rather than retreat, we decided to push on, to spend some of our financial reserves and to bet on a strong recovery.

Looking back now from the relative comfort of the fall of 2023 it seems like the right choice. This year we were able to hit the ground running with the yurt done, with a seasoned team, poised to build from a position of relative strength. But that story is not finished, it's for next year. So, suffice to say I hope you find a bit of inspiration in the following pages.

Not only did we survive the pandemic and build a lovely new addition to our collection of yurts on Spruce. We also fulfilled our mission in ongoing and new ways, helping kids figure out how they can contribute in meaningful ways to the well-being of their communities. Our stories in these pages are stories of growing partnerships and collaborations, of us doing what we do best – helping people put things in perspective.

It's a funny thing to be on the receiving end of these lessons. We ask kids every day to step outside of their comfort zones, set goals, take risks; strive to be more than they think they can. As adults we sometimes get a refresher in this lesson too.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave Martin".

Dave Martin

Executive Director

*In Their Own Words: "This is the best day I've ever had!" Hazel, 10*

# 2022 Board Of Directors

## **Mark Wenzler | Board Chair | Director of the Chautauqua Climate Change Initiative, Washington DC**

Mark is an environmental lawyer and advocate who has worked for 30+ years to protect people and nature from pollution, climate change, and ecological degradation. He is currently the Director of Climate Change Initiative at the Chautauqua Institution. He spent many years as the Senior Vice President for Conservation Programs at the National Parks Conservation Association. Mark lives in Washington DC with his spouse Dare and daughter Nina (a veteran of many wonderful Experience Learning summer programs). He is an avid cyclist, runner, backcountry skier, paddler and backpacker, enjoying all of these activities in and around West Virginia's Monongahela National Forest.

## **Erin Casto Chrest | Board Secretary | Director of Major & Planned Giving, Maryland Public Television, Baltimore MD**

Erin Chrest is a West Virginia native who is dedicated to helping non-profit organizations secure the philanthropic resources they need to achieve ambitious goals. Erin participated in TMI's WV Scholars' Academy as a high school student, sparking a deep love for our mountains and a passion for wilderness-based education and leadership training. An alumna of Wheeling Jesuit University, she earned her Masters in Appalachian Studies from Appalachian State University.

## **Daniel Taylor | Board Treasurer | President, Future Generations University, Franklin WV**

Daniel Taylor, one of the founders of the original Woodlands and Whitewater Institute, developed Woodlands' international programs, still ongoing at The Mountain Institute. He has authored half-a-dozen books sharing his insights from four decades of working for social change and conservation. He went on to develop the eight Future Generations organizations worldwide, including the accredited Future Generations University.

## **Kelly Kibble Griffith | Senior Legal Editor, Thomson Reuters, Charleston, WV**

Kelly Griffith is a native West Virginian who, thanks in large part to her involvement with TMI's WV Scholars' Academy in high school and college, is deeply committed to providing opportunities for people of all ages to spend meaningful time in the mountains. After earning her bachelor's degree in Natural Resource Conservation and Management from the University of Kentucky, Kelly earned her law degree from Georgetown University.

## **Dan Tompkins | Director of Regional External Affairs, Akron, OH**

Dan was raised in Morgantown, WV and attended TMI's West Virginia Honor Roll and Scholars Academy in 1994. He returned to work for the program at the Spruce Knob Mountain Center in 1996 and 1999. Those months on Spruce fostered a lifelong understanding of the importance of place and he has returned to Spruce each year since 1994 to refresh the connection. Dan earned a B.A. in History from Connecticut College and a Master's in Public Administration from Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. Dan's career has included public service at the state and federal levels and government relations & consulting work in both the health care and energy industries in Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Texas, and West Virginia. He currently lives in Akron, OH with his wife and son.

## **Melody Flowers | Executive Director for Strategic Analysis & Policy at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY**

Originally from Barboursville, West Virginia, Melody fell in love with Spruce Knob in 1994 during her time with the WV Scholars' Academy and returns to the mountains every chance she gets (including as the camp cook in 2000). With a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Kentucky and a Master's in Public Policy from the Harvard Kennedy School, Melody has engaged in strategic and financial planning, project management, and policy work for over twenty years in fields as varied as transportation, environmental sustainability, community and economic development, emergency preparedness, homeland security, healthcare, and higher education. Committed to place-based development, she serves on the boards of CivicLex, the Downtown Lexington Partnership, Fayette Alliance, and the Gaines Center for the Humanities; regularly lectures on the economics of higher education; and mentors nationally competitive scholarship candidates.

## **Joanna Ganning | Associate Dean for Faculty Research, Development and Administration, Levin College of Public Affairs and Education, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH**

After spending the summer of 1998 at Spruce Knob, Joanna returned to her hometown of Keyser with a desire to be part of a better future for Appalachia. To that end, she earned a BS in Environmental Resource Management from Penn State. Through various internships, including one as mentor to the 2000 Scholars Academy, she found her niche in economic development strategy and analysis. Joanna earned a Masters of Urban and Regional Planning from Virginia Tech and a PhD in Regional Planning from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Joanna serves on the boards of Shaker Heights Development Corporation, VibrantNEO (a committee of the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency), and is a community member of the Shaker Heights City Planning Commission and Board of Zoning Appeals.



# Building A Legacy At Back Creek

In the fall of 2021, Experience Learning staff visited Tomahawk Intermediate School to facilitate our Appalachian Watershed and Stream Monitors (AWSM) program which allows our field instructors to travel to West Virginia schools and educate students about the environmental processes happening in their own backyards. Back Creek flows directly behind Tomahawk Intermediate School and was the perfect place to learn about stream health and relate it to the larger Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Eager students made their way down to the stream that very first day, ready to learn about their local water systems, only to find the public access at Back Creek had been vandalized and overrun with trash from the area's frequent use. Still excited about the day ahead, Mystee Ansari's 5th grade class became citizen scientists, testing all the components of the stream. Students collected data, that would be later submitted to the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection. The students then used what they learned to create a beautification plan. Throughout the year students drew plans for a mural to cover the graffiti at the stream site. In spring 2022, students held a clean-up day, picking up trash and began painting a mural. The mural was completed, highlighting riparian buffer zones and included a positive message to the community, all led and designed by the 5th grade class. This has turned into an annual tradition for Mystee's 5th grade class, and in fall of 2022, all 12 5th grade classes at Tomahawk Intermediate School participated in an AWSM

program. In spring 2023, Mystee's class designed and revamped their mural, picked up litter, planted native plants, and wrote a letter to community leaders to have trash bins accessible at the stream access. This day involved not only Mystee's class, but those that came to support were parents, the local paper, and the local Sherwin Williams who donated the paint. This meaningful watershed educational experience continues to grow and reach more people each year and began with our ability to share the importance of hands-on outdoor learning.



*In Their Own Words: "This is the coolest thing we've done in class all year!"*

*Carter, 13*

*After an AWSM Program*





# In 2022 We...



Educated **2,868** Kids

Got kids out camping  
**1525** individual nights

Educated **606** adults

Spent **582** hours volunteering  
In Monongahela National Forest

Analyzed the health of **55** West Virginia streams

Awarded **\$14,122** in scholarships  
that sent **50** kids to summer camp





# Introducing, The Altai



While American wooden yurts are lovely, building them has always been about more than the aesthetic. Yurts are democracy and team-building made physical. They demand thought, faith, many partners and the tension and compression that hold them up are revealed in the community of the builders as well.

Experience Learning and our previous incarnations going back to the Woodlands Institute in the 1970s has been known for our yurts. In fact, people often refer to the place as the yurts – perhaps because we change our name so often.



For our founders, there was never much question about what sort of architecture would grace the amazing Spruce Knob Campus. Daniel Taylor had been friends with Bill Coperthwaite and participated in early yurt builds. Both loved the math and the social movement they made physical. In the '70s, after the height of the civil rights movement, Vietnam and Watergate, certain people were very much interested in re-skilling, doing more for themselves and considering how to live more independently and lightly on the landscape. Bill called this part of the movement “democratic building,” a process whereby anyone with some basic hand tools, a couple of bucks and some friends could build a serviceable, and beautiful, shelter.



Each of our yurts at Spruce tells a story. Ulan Bator, the main yurt was the first real manifestation of the organization. The founders, friends, family and a few funders gathered to build what would become an organizational touchstone in 1975.

Almati, the adjoining meeting yurt was built in 1992 as the organization wrestled with explosive growth involving the expansion and development of international programs including the development of a National Park around Mount Everest.



In 2019, after our first couple of years getting Experience Learning off the ground as this new/ old organization we developed our first formal strategic plan. Identified in that plan was the need for increased covered meeting and dining space.

The Altai is the largest free-span yurt yet built, and is the design collaboration of Experience Learning staff with Mike Iaconia of Dickinson Reach Yurts, one of Bill's protégés, with some engineering help from Verdant Structural Engineers.

We built The Altai at a bit of a delicate moment. Were we emerging from the pandemic? What would recovery look like? Could we get materials? Would anyone show up to help? But our ancient ethic, to push on until something stops us, to work with what we have, now, rather than waiting for manna to fall from heaven, prevailed. Our work was the collaboration and efforts of the organization, yes, but also of the very human energy of our friends: from Whiterock Excavating who endured ever changing plans from our engineering friends; from Alvy Humphries who brought his boom truck up to set the eyrie on top of the building; from our team of volunteer builders, friends new and old that labored for 2 weeks to put the structure up.

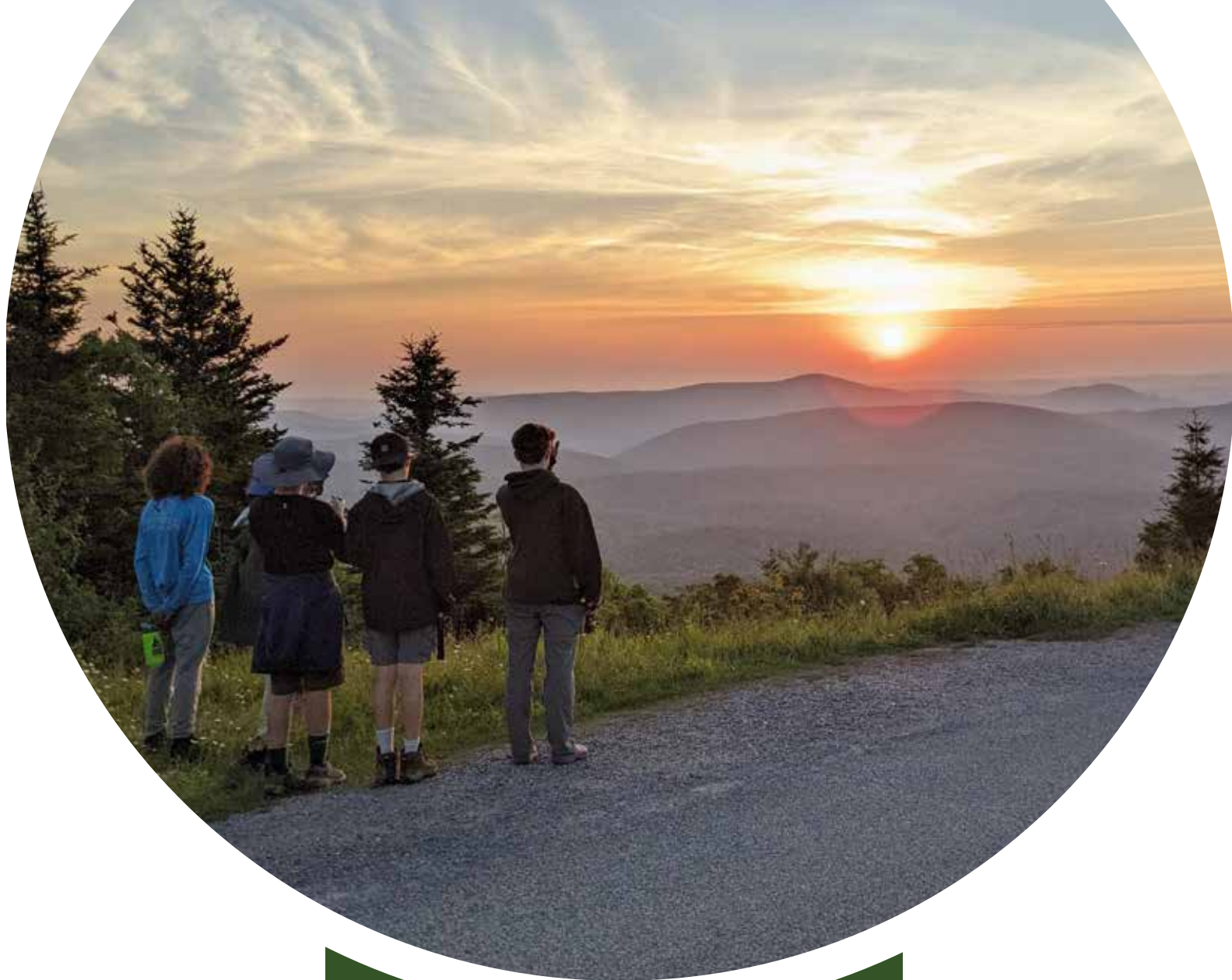
At the end of two weeks we had a building, and of course also true to form we proceeded to pick away at shingling it for the rest of the fine weather months. Probably every single staff member nailed up at least a few shingles, as did many of our Trustees.

So, as the premise of democratic building works, we have built not just a structure, but strengthened a community and ended up with a lovely, functional reminder of our emerging from the pandemic – a little beat up, but nevertheless committed to the cause and intending to carry on.

**Special thanks to all the volunteers who's hard work made this project possible! (listed on pg. 10)**

**Take a peek at The Altai finished on the cover!**





# Growing Partnerships & Supporting Underserved Youth

*In Their Own Words: " This is the most beautiful, place! If I had to pick my favorite place, This would be it." James, 12, Referring to Spruce Knob*



In 2022, Experience Learning partnered with The Mayfly Project (TMP), an organization that uses fly fishing as a catalyst to mentor some of our most vulnerable youth - those in the foster care & kinship system. TMP's experience suggests that exposing foster children to this rewarding hobby provides students an opportunity to have fun, feel supported, and develop a meaningful connection with the outdoors. The efforts of TMP align with Experience Learning's mission so organically and the challenges these kids face are so great, that we jumped at the opportunity. TMP also introduced us to KVC West Virginia and the First Star Academy, two other national non-profits that work with foster children in different capacities. KVC supports mindful growth and development for at risk youth through a whole spectrum of services including in-home family support, foster care, adoption, in-home mental health therapy and youth educational support. The First Star Academy works with KVC students to provide specifically high school age youth in foster care the academic, life skills and career exploration experiences they need to successfully transition to higher education and adulthood. Together they work across the age spectrum to set kids up for success when they age out of the system at 18. It is a very tall order.

Together we developed a ladder program to serve these kids. In the spring of 2022, KVC and First Star scholars participated in The Mayfly Project. They spent a whole day learning the basics of fly fishing, casting, knot tying, and conservation efforts before practicing their hook sets on eager fish at a local lake. The second Mayfly outing consisted of a weekend adventure to the Spruce Knob Mountain Center (SKMC), fishing world renowned trout streams, and exploring Pendleton County. The WVDNR supported the effort by providing a fish shocking demonstration and spoke to the scholars of careers in the field of wildlife and fish management. The day concluded with an incredible sunset atop the summit.

After the conclusion of the KVC / First Star trip to SKMC, connections grew to our taking part in First Star's annual two-week camp. Students would now get the opportunity to spend seven days at the SKMC to do even more exploring! This summer KVC staff and the First Star Scholars traveled to SKMC for a week filled with new outdoor experiences, personal growth, and healing. Scholars orienteered to the highest summit in WV, explored caves, canoed Spruce Knob Lake, investigated life below the water's surface with the USFS via stream snorkeling, toured Greenbank Observatory, had a star party, went fly fishing, learned survival tactics, mountain biked at Sweetwater Farm Trail Center, and wrapped the week up with a campfire and s'mores.

This partnership has blossomed into a wonderful network of organizations working together to provide underserved youth with meaningful experiences and support. Looking forward, we intend for this collaboration to be an annual series, where kids from across the state of West Virginia can come together to visit SKMC for a fully immersive experience, integrating outdoor learning, new skills, memorable moments, and self-reflection exercises. The future is bright for this partnership and we expect it to grow and reach more kids in the coming years!



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Brad Boll

## 2022 High Camp Society

High Camp Society was created in 2017 to establish a solid foundation for the growth of Experience Learning. We are grateful to this year's members for helping to create life changing experiences through outdoor learning.

**To join High Camp Society in 2023**  
**Contact: Dave Martin**  
**[dmartin@experience-learning.org](mailto:dmartin@experience-learning.org)**

### Beech Level | \$1000-\$2999

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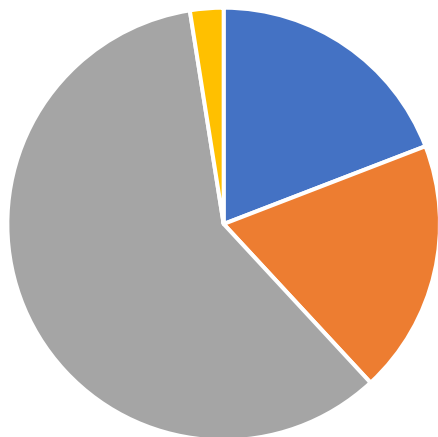
Glenn Rehberger  
Marianne J Skeen

### Spruce Level | \$5000 & Up

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# 2022 Revenue & Expenditures

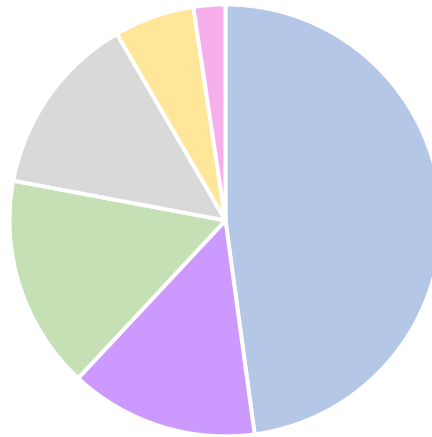


■ Donations ■ Grants ■ Tuition and Fees ■ Other

## Revenue

Tuition & Fees: \$553,350  
 Donations: \$178,396  
 Grants: \$176,756  
 Other: \$23,328

**Total \$931,830**



■ Personnel - Program ■ Personnel - Non Program ■ Program Implementation  
 ■ Facilities ■ Communications ■ Professional Fees

## Expenditures

Personnel | Program Implementation: \$424,206  
 Program Implementation: \$141,777  
 Personnel | Non-Program: \$125,119  
 Facilities: \$121,172  
 Communications: \$53,267  
 Professional Fees: \$21,121  
**Total \$886,662**

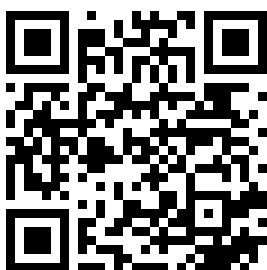
## Donate Today!

We believe in the power of wild places to empower and inspire people. We help participants of our programs realize their own potential to become confident and competent members of their communities through meaningful outdoor experiences.

**Please consider supporting our work and allow us to continue to changing lives.**

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