



## **Y-WE Nature Connections**

***By: Sonali Jasuja, Mentor***

Once a month, you'll see a caravan of cars filled with 30 youth and 8 adults departing from the Young Women Empowered office at El Centro de Raza on Beacon Hill. If you follow their journey, you may see them stop within the city limits, perhaps at a patch of green city park south of headquarters or at the Mountaineers Club up north. More often than not, you'll actually see them leaving the city itself, marching towards the mountains east or the coast west. Once they've reached their destination, you'll see them disembark geared up for the adventure at hand - hats, gloves, rain pants, skis and poles for cross country skiing at Easton Lake; snowshoes for hiking at Mt. Rainier National Park; tents, sleeping bags, and harnesses for rock climbing in Vantage.

For most, this will be their first time in this specific part of Washington, doing this outdoor activity, using these tools and learning these skills. Nevertheless, this intergenerational group of womxn and gender non-conforming folks are united by their deep respect for nature and connections with themselves and each other facilitated through these shared adventures outdoors.

As a mentor with Nature Connections, I personally feel incredibly lucky to belong to a community of diverse, courageous, curious, supportive, and powerful people exploring and problem-solving together in nature, "territory" historically inaccessible to womxn of color and other marginalized folks in this country. I got to sit down with a few youth to understand why this program is meaningful to them.

Lola in her second year of the program shared, "I use Nature Connections as a way to refresh myself of the city and school and everything...it's a great opportunity to learn about the environment, what you can do to help it, and jobs to help you do that. Everyone there is just so accepting; everyone encourages you to do stuff even if you feel like you can't or are afraid to."

A few youth also talked about the powerful community. Hillary, an 8th-grader, said "I feel like it's a unique community because we all have a common interest in nature...Being females it brings us all together closer; we understand what we go through, and we can see it from a different point of view." Aniah, a senior in her first year of the program, said, "I feel relaxed. I like all the of the positive energy. That's important to me... I consider everyone my friends." Nadia, in her first year of the program described the "supportive" group as "a family that meets once a month."



She went on to say, “I never explored Washington that much. My family’s busy; I knew I wouldn’t do it otherwise...I wouldn’t go to Mt. Rainier myself.” Every person I talked to shared the same sentiment - they would not have this opportunity for access and relationship to nature and community if not for the Y-WE Nature Connections program. I must say I agree in my own experience.

A lot goes on behind the scenes to make Nature Connections so successfully impactful for everyone who participates. It became its own distinct leadership program in 2016 with 13 youth participating through funding by Washington’s No Child Left Inside Grant, the Russell Family Foundation, and the Clif Bar Foundation. This year with youth and mentor participation more than doubling, Y-WE Nature Connections received REI’s Force of Nature Grant and received continued funding from the Russell Family Foundation. Beyond generous funding, the Washington Trails Association rents out all our gear for youth at no cost each program day. The Mountaineers also partners with Y-WE staff to plan, organize, and facilitate our trips through grants from The North Face and ESPN. Fellow mentors donate time to participate in these awesome events with youth, supporting and encouraging them along the way. And of course the Y-WE staff magically pull all of this together into seamless, unforgettable experiences for everyone involved.

Thank you to everyone that has supported the Nature Connections program so far! I leave you with this note from Nadia:

*“Step outside your comfort zone and join Nature Connections. You never know if you’re going to visit some place amazing. Might as well do it now...”*