



Molly Hart

Girls on Ice

story by Megan McGinty

Allyson Casado is tired. Three time zones away from her home in the Bronx, New York, she's carrying a backpack that's nearly as large as she is and it's only getting heavier as a steady Pacific Northwest summer drizzle soaks her pack, her hair, her jacket, her gaiters (an item she has never even seen until yesterday). It's getting colder as she hikes further up the slopes of Mount Baker and it will be dark soon, maybe even before her group makes it to camp. The irony of it all is that she actually competed to be in this position.

She and eight other young women make up the 2007 Girls On Ice team. Between the ages of 15 and 18, from across the US and

Canada, they will spend the next ten days learning how to set up tents, travel across a glacier, measure stream flow, and to articulate their thoughts and ideas about science and how they see it influencing their world. Nearly a hundred young women responded to the call for applicants, answering questions about themselves, their interest in science, teamwork and future goals. Applications arrived from Florida, Washington, Montana, Ontario, Alaska, Uttarakhand (India), all of them young women who were eager to go out into the mountains and study under the guidance of three mentors: a glaciologist, a mountaineer and a geologist.

Cece Mortenson is an experienced mountaineering guide, with expedition experience all over the globe. She will lead this group of students through a series of lessons, teaching them the skills they need to safely navigate the glaciers, exploring crevasses, mapping features and gauging meltwater streams. She, glaciologist Erin Pettit, and geologist Nicole Bowerman form a unique instructional team, one that the girls have probably never seen the likes of before. "It made you realize that we could be scientists too, to see them together," a 2006 team member said after her trip.

Climate change is a complicated subject to teach. Bringing the science of climatology into a scope and manner that most of us can actually grasp is difficult enough. Sorting through the data in the social and political atmosphere that surrounds the issue can be overwhelming. To say the least, it is a challenge to explain these issues in a way that is relevant, engaging and empowering. In environmental education, it is widely held that the best way to teach people about issues is to take them to

the places where the events are unfolding. Educating people about salmon and their needs is feasible because walking to the edge of a stream to watch salmon migrating is direct, exciting and easy. Flying someone over a developing forest fire or outlining the thermodynamics behind meteorological change on a global scale is a bit more daunting. However, there is ice. The Pacific Northwest has the largest concentration of glaciers in the contiguous U.S., and many of these are right out our back door. By bringing these young women to the Easton Glacier and teaching them to collect data, analyze it, and develop their own conclusions, Pettit hopes to empower a set of emerging leaders who are critical thinkers, confident in their abilities, and comfortable discussing scientific and social ideas. Emerging leaders who happen to be women.

Pettit didn't set out to create something that would become a nationally recognized landmark program when she began. In 1999, she and Michele Koppes, then both PhD candidates at the University of Washington, proposed a field science course for high-school students. They would take the group bushwhacking



Nicole Bowerman

up a tangled drainage to reach the South Cascade glacier and study glaciology for 7 days. The funny thing was, only girls signed up for the course. During the trip, Koppes and Pettit noticed a difference between the way their team behaved in the field and the way girls had behaved in the co-ed middle school classrooms Pettit had been teaching in. Freed from the social demands of being in a mixed-gender group, the field students developed a camaraderie and confidence that allowed them to loosen up and immerse themselves in the experience. At the same time, both instructors were aware that they were somewhat of a rarity by virtue of the fact that they were females pursuing higher degrees in the Earth sciences. Consequently, in order to encourage young women to get involved

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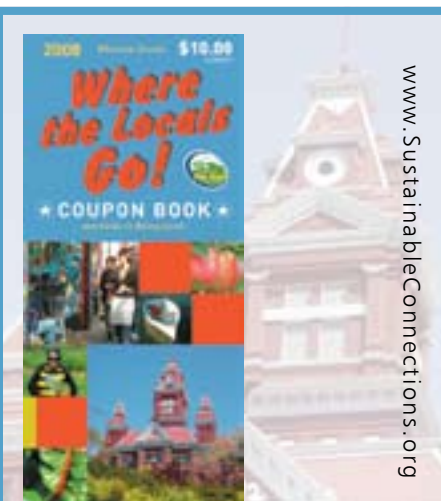
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in science, they decided to continue the course as a girls-only experience, but had to find a new home. In 2000, Pettit approached North Cascades Institute with her idea. The Institute agreed to provide a permanent home for the course, taking on registration, helping Koppes and Pettit with the logistics, and providing scholarship assistance for some students.

The program became tuition-free in 2006 and the number of applicants soared to 100. In 2008 the program will be entering its tenth year.

Helen Gebhewat is a native of Eritrea, a country west of Ethiopia. Her mother, brother and sisters are still there. Less than a year ago, she came to the U.S. because it

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was safer here. A science teacher in her new school saw the announcement for the 2007 Girls on Ice team and encouraged her to apply. When asked if any other Eritreans had ever been on the side of Mount Baker, she replied, "No, I think I am the only one." Having never camped before and dealt with Pacific Northwest weather for less than a year, Helen found the trip particularly challenging. She had rarely seen snow and never walked on it. On the last day, the girls were asked what they would tell future students thinking about applying to the



Molly Hart

program. "You get muscles!" Helen grinned, flexing her bicep and pointing to it. "I never had a muscle before." Others chime in with their suggestions: "You have to be motivated to be a good team." "You gotta be able to laugh it off." "You can't be scared to try something new."

Pettit snaps one last picture of each of the girls; Allyson Casado crosses her arms and smiles, the very image of self-possession. It shouldn't be that big a deal—another group of kids out enjoying the summer break, really. But the train of nine young women with oversized mountaineering packs, chattering and joking in that blessed state of oblivion

exclusive to adolescents and movie stars, is continuously attracting attention as they head down the trail leading from the Schriebers Meadow Trailhead to the Easton Glacier. A

man and three kids all stop with mouths hanging open in matching 'O's, a pair of middle-aged women grin and remark on how cool it is to see an all-female group, two young men bounding up the steep grade turn their heads and gape without breaking stride. In spite of all the staring, there is no awkwardness, no offense is taken or given. The girls are proud, and they know they've done something unusual and difficult, something worth telling the world about.



Nicole Bowerman

Girls on Ice is an eleven-day leadership program for teenage girls that combines leadership, mountaineering and science.

The program takes place July 28-August 7, 2008 and is free to girls who qualify via a merit-based application process. It is open to girls 15-18 years old who have shown a keen interest in science and the outdoors.

More information and downloadable applications are on the Girls on Ice web page or by calling Megan at (360) 856-5700 ext. 202.

Applications are due March 15.

To find out more about Girls on Ice, stop by the North Cascades Institute offices in Sedro-Woolley (inside the North Cascades National Park Headquarters), visit www.ncascades.org or phone 360-856-5700 x209.



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