

**Testimony of Robin Chiles**

**Before the Committee on Natural Resources**

**Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands**

**H.R. 3458, the Recreation Not Red Tape Act, and H.R. 3879, the Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation Act**

**September 19, 2019**

Chairwoman Haaland, Ranking Member Young, and members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to share my support of the H.R. 3458, the Recreation Not Red Tape Act, and H.R. 3879, the SOAR Act.

I am the Director of Admissions and Outreach of the YMCA's BOLD & GOLD programs, Boys Outdoor Leadership Program and Girls Outdoor Leadership Program in Seattle. During the summer we take approx. 500 teens camping, backpacking, river rafting, rock climbing, and mountaineering in some of the most beautiful places in the Pacific Northwest. We serve a broad range of communities. 1/3 of our youth pay full price, 1/3 receive some form of support, and 1/3 of our participants receive a substantial scholarship. All are leaders on their own way and the outdoors provides them an opportunity to learn more about themselves, each other, and the amazing places they visit.

These are transformative trips for the participants but we cannot always meet the high demand for our programs due to lack of access to public lands. We have a disclaimer on our program schedule stating that all trips are dependent on availability of federal land use permits and backcountry reservations. The permitting processes in their current state are tedious and labor intensive. In the case of Forest Lands, permits are pretty much unattainable.

Peter, a 12-year-old boy who has lived in Washington State is entire life and had never been camping or hiking, participated in our Mt. Rainier National Park trip, "Beyond City Limits", a camping and hiking adventure last summer. On the first morning of his trip, Peter arrived at the Y to be outfitted with all of the camping gear and outdoor clothing he would need to be comfortable. One of the ways we remove barriers for youth is to provide all the clothing and equipment to those that need it. After the group had learned each other's' names and done some

teambuilding activities, they packed up a bus with all their gear and headed out for the more than two-hour drive to the national park. It had been a busy and exciting morning for them -a flurry of fast paced activity. Once the group had settled down for the ride, Peter tapped one of his instructors on the shoulder, who was seated in front of him and asked, "What's Mt. Rainier park?" Peter knew he was going camping in a park and knew what Rainier looked like – he could see it on clear days, but everyone had been talking about Mt. Rainier park and he did not know what they meant. "What's Mt. Rainier park?" The instructor told Peter about the majestic park and how he would experience the mountain up close, and said "just wait until you see it." Each day Peter's sense of awe and wonder increased. He hugged trees, amazed that he could not get his arms around them; he asked many questions about the flora and fauna; he asked if people lived out there; how he could work out there.

I always check in with the groups when they return and knowing this was Peter's first-time camping, I asked him how he liked it. He immediately beamed a broad smile. I then asked him for a highlight. He thoughtfully said, "Getting to see that mountain." As I looked at him I could tell he was experiencing it again in his mind's eye. Then he said, "You know I usually drink soda and juice, but I've been drinking only water for the past week and I feel a whole lot better. I think I'm going to drink more water from now on. Maybe my family will too!"

Later the instructor told me of his conversation with Peter on the bus and how Peter thought the trip was too short. The trip is only five days long because that is the maximum length of time we are allowed us to spend in the park. My contact at his school told me of the new self-confidence he exudes and how appreciative he is of the experience. He wants to experience more public lands and wild places.

Peter is just one of many who are experiencing the outdoors for the first time with us and have reaped the benefits that these type of experiences have to offer. I often have to tell disappointed youth and their families that our trips are full. When they ask, can't you add another group, I have to explain our lack of access.

Our Mt. Rainier trips are some of the most popular, however the permitting process is one of the most difficult for us. While we have this same trip Peter did on our 2020 schedule, we are seriously considering cancelling the program there due to restrictive permitting issues. We are only allowed one five day backpacking trip per year at Mt Rainier and we use that permit for a high school

trip that visits all three of Washington State's National Parks over the course of three weeks.

For Peter's trip we needed both a Special Use Permit, which we need to renew annually; and day hike permits for **each** day we are in the park for **each** group, which also need to be renewed annually. We send one girl's and one boy's group at the same time to the park. While these groups are separate self-contained groups of 12, we are not allowed to have the two groups hiking anywhere in the park at the same time. This means of the 5 days that the groups are allowed to camp in the park, they are able to hike only two days. We alternate hiking days for the groups- boys one day, girls the next. We try to meet with the Park's interpretive rangers to provide education sessions on the days they are not allowed to hike. This is a work around that allows them to hike from their campsite because they have a ranger with the group. The alternative for the teens is to sit in camp or drive around the park on the days they are not allowed to hike. Learning from the rangers is an amazing opportunity, however, it only happens because of the relations our staff have built with the staff there.

We hear over and over again from staff at the National Parks and the Forest Service that they want to get youth outside and enjoying the lands, that they are also committed to engaging young people, that seeing young people learn to love these places is a highlight for them, but their hands are tied. They know that facilitated experiences are the gateway for most youth, but they do not have the ability to allow young people access either.

As a result of youth participating in facilitated outdoor opportunities such as BOLD & GOLD they are getting to experience their public lands in a meaningful way. The impact has created a career path for some and an increased awareness of the importance of stewardship of the environment for most.

Emily is one of our participants who found her life's direction on our trips. At a young age she lost her father in a tragic accident which deeply affected her. In her own words, "School wasn't doing much for me. I didn't like it." In middle school she was considered at high risk for dropping out until she participated in her first BOLD & GOLD summer program. She flourished and was successful for the first time in a long time. She returned every summer. In high school she served as a volunteer intern and then returned as a Leader in Training, a competitive program for BOLD & GOLD alumnae who show excellent leadership skills. At 18, Emily obtained her Wilderness Emergency Medical Training certification, an intense 200 hour medical training which qualifies her to work on

an ambulance or search and rescue. She went from being in danger of dropping out to receiving high marks for her medical training as the youngest person in the class! In 2019 she returned to BOLD & GOLD as a paid instructor. She said “if I could have the impact on just one participant like the program has had on me I will feel accomplished.” This is what a program on our public lands can do.

These stories are not unique. BOLD & GOLD is a national Y program that originated in Seattle. It has expanded to YMCA Associations across the nation. The Y association in Boise, Idaho was excited to develop the program there, but could not get permits to run programs on the forest lands that surround the Y camp. For their first year of tripping one group of 12 backpacked around the perimeter of the camp property for a week. This could only be done one group at a time. The hope was that this would be a stop gap until the permitting process changed. It didn't and the Y feeling defeated, cancelled the program.

Even in Seattle, we take young people to Canada for many of our rock climbing programs because we can't get a permit locally. We would like to spend more time in less popular areas than Mt. Rainier teaching young people about the beauty and solitude so close to their homes, but we cannot get permits with the Forest Service. We are currently the single biggest users of the North Cascades National Park and the second largest users of the Olympic National Park and have no room to grow there.

In Billings, Montana the Y there drove groups of teens to Wyoming to a National Park because they could not secure Forest Service permits in their state. Their Y association decided to cancel the program because it was too expensive to drive so far and too risky – not knowing if they would get permits or enough to grow the program.

The Y of Metropolitan Atlanta began the permitting process with the Forest Service in the fall of 2018 for BOLD & GOLD trips for this past summer 2019. The permitting ranger told them that they were pretty confident they would be able to secure a permit for them, but it wouldn't be before July. It's now September and the permit has still not come through.

In each one of these situations, teens like Peter and Emily are being denied the opportunity to experience the outdoors. This is not happening because of a lack of demand for our programming or because of a lack of support from our communities. It's happening because we do not have access to public lands, lands that we are saying belong to them. In addition, the complicated permitting

system requires us to divert our administrative resources away from important functions like staff training, fundraising, and curriculum development that improve the quality of our programming. And our talented wilderness instructors have no guarantee of work.

I often tell youth and their care givers, who are worried about not having the proper camping gear or outdoor clothing, that we will provide everything for them --gear, transportation, food, and, and tuition assistance. In fact, the least of their worries should be the cost. We provide subsidies to approximately two-thirds of our participants. If they want to go on a trip, we will make it happen. At BOLD & GOLD we work diligently to remove the barriers to outdoor experiences for youth. Please support these Acts and help us remove the biggest barrier we face, access to public lands. Thank you.



Peter's YMCA BOLD & GOLD Group, "Beyond City Limits, Camping Hiking at Mt. Rainier



Emily in the North Cascades on YMCA BOLD & GOLD's "Call to the Summit"