

Representation and Belonging on the Trail

By Alexa Shapiro



Nature has always been my source of solace and peace. As a child, the juniper trees lining our yard offered an escape from my older brothers — a place to get lost in the birds' songs and the sun's rays as I observed nature and explored to my heart's content.

I spent most of my post-college years working outdoors. All my free time was devoted to being outside, either hiking or climbing. I was so filled with inspiration when my parents started section-hiking the Pacific Crest Trail that it was easy for me to persuade myself to do a thru-hike.

During my hike, I learned so much about myself and the world around me. I was filled with gratitude for the immense kindness and generosity of the trail community — a community filled with a rare breed of people who look out for one another because of a shared love of the outdoors. I realized I could do hard things, even on the days when my mind begged me to quit early and head back to the comforts of home. And I experienced the healing power of nature, something that would later become crucial as I navigated the rocky terrain of "real" life.

I also learned lessons about belonging. These often came in moments when I was offered unsolicited advice about things that I felt perfectly comfortable doing on my own. Or when people questioned whether I was carrying my fair share of weight because my partner, who was 90 pounds heavier than me, had a larger pack.

I contemplated belonging, too, when other female hikers told me they'd been lectured about heightened bear precautions when menstruating, or when I heard the "fun" trail names people gave us, which always seemed to relate to our most noticeable physical attributes.

It was rare that I had other women to hike with — despite being a part of two large trail families — and I was fully aware of the lack of representation of so many identities on the trail. After addressing inappropriate statements from some of the more toxic corners of the trail community and having meaningful discussions with my trail family about the importance of representation, I came to understand the value of dialogue around diversity, equity and inclusion in the outdoors.



For the past four years, this has become my life's work. I started a nonprofit organization in Minnesota called the Winona Outdoor Collaborative. Our team works to reduce barriers to getting outdoors so that all individuals can experience nature's incredible benefits.

The question I'm most frequently asked is, "What barriers do people face in getting outdoors?"

That depends. It depends on the demographics of the people. It depends on the region of the country. It depends on the financial resources of a community to support equitable access. It depends on so many factors, each of which highlights how not everyone has the same safe and inclusive space to explore the outdoors.

I recognize why this is so hard for some folks. To be told that a community you're part of is not doing enough can be devastating and disappointing. It can feel like a personal attack, especially when you are not experiencing these things directly. It can be easy to want to ignore it or to loudly proclaim opposing viewpoints, even going as far as to insist these discussions are strictly political and don't belong in the outdoors.

I'm not here to change anyone's mind about this work's importance or validity, but I am here to offer a perspective from someone who has lived through interactions that made me question the one thing about myself that I always knew to be true: that I belong outdoors.

If I could come to question my own belonging in nature, then surely more people like me are being left with the impression that outdoors spaces aren't for them.

The trail community is strong, with deep connections. It's a community that I've received so much from and feel indebted to in many ways. I couldn't imagine my life without this profoundly important community, and I know that many other backpackers, day hikers and recreationalists feel similarly.

But our passion and love for the trail community doesn't mean that we are impervious to the negative culture that can exist in outdoor spaces. We still have more work to do to create a culture that truly supports every individual in finding their own sense of belonging in nature. Thinking about these issues, talking about them, even being open to the fact that they exist is a great start, and from there, we can do so much more. After all, we all belong out there, together. 🐾

The Winona Outdoor Collaborative's mission is to promote inclusion and accessibility through community partnerships and educational programming directed at reducing barriers to outdoor recreation.

To learn more, visit
www.winonaoutdoorcollaborative.com.

Opposite page: Knife's Edge, Goat Rocks Wilderness, Washington. **Top:** Alexa at Forester Pass, the highest point on the PCT, Sequoia National Park and Kings Canyon National Park border, California. **Above:** Alexa Shapiro and her husband, Cooper "Bighorn" McCormick, at the northern terminus of the PCT and U.S./Canada border, Pasayten Wilderness, Washington.