



**Alex Bochner at an American national park.**

(Picture published in the Intermountain Jewish News)

**Youth Voice Coyote Twisting alongside a Van**  
**By: Alex Bochner**

In my time in college, I have learned many things in the classroom and some things in the lab. But some of the most important lessons I learned happened in a van. Well, more specifically, on the side of the road in a National Park, next to a van.

I was one of 17 students who participated in the Westminster Expedition, and experience in which students live out of a van, travel to National Parks, participate in outdoor learning and still earn credits towards their degree.

The group was diverse, and surprisingly for Utah – included two other Jewish students. We were men and women, seniors and sophomores and represented states from Maine to California. It took us a while to get to know each other, but after naming a wooden boat we built during the early days of the expedition the “Coyote,” we formed the kind of bond that comes from shared experiences. The Westminster “coyote family” was born.

Looking back on the semester of travel, a few moments stand out in particular.

One morning early on in the trip, we were eating breakfast and getting ready to head out for a hike. Our National Outdoor Leadership School instructor and self proclaimed “dirt bag,” Brett Carroll – who has been living out of his van since graduating from Westminster in 2015 – started to do his daily “twists” to stretch his lower back and hips. He explained that he read how a 100 year old man credited his longevity to his 50 daily twists.

The motion requires a gentle swinging of the hips from side to side with your arms raised to provide more control, which to an observer looks very goofy. Brett encouraged us all to try the twists, and thus, a contagious routine began among the coyotes. Any time we all were parked in a place with a decent space for movement, one person would start to twist and, before you knew it, everyone was twisting. We often received sideways glances from passer-by, but we understood. Coyotes run in a pack.

We learned important lessons about the environment around us, including land use, native sovereignty, historical influences and the laws of environmental priority. The earth around us supported expansive diversity. The flora and fauna surrounding us were even more varied than the members of our coyote pack.

We listened to the perspectives of indigenous people who suffered gravely from Western land-grabbing and subsequent damming of rivers for energy. We were pushed constantly to see from the vantage point of tribal members and to incorporate this view into topics we discussed while on the road. Our growth from these experiences, individually and collectively, was real and tangible.

We had started our journey as individuals, came together as our own coyote pack and then felt our perspectives transform to see ourselves as members of the human race, existing in the natural world. This growth was inevitable among us as we faced novel situations created by the environment around us and our many encounters with new people. The great expanse of the outdoors allowed us to be vulnerable and explore ideas and places knowing that our pack would accept us and help us form our ideas.

As the vice president for outdoor programming with Hillel for Utah, I often meet students who want to experience outdoor recreation in Utah but who do not have the necessary experience or connections to do so. I am so grateful for what I learned about myself and now know I can apply empathy, respect and understanding of diverse backgrounds to students involved with Hillel’s outdoor programming. The expedition isn’t just for those who want to see the natural world, but also those who want to see beyond themselves.

As I reflect on those incredible 81 days on the road throughout the American West, I can see that I learned to hear all the sides of the story on my journey and that a close pack of coyotes can be created from almost any group of individuals. Because of this trip, I will always embrace the diversity and richness that lives in our culture. Wherever I am or whomever I meet, I know this experience will help me to see beyond the individual and beyond the coyote pack, seeing humanity in our environment — even when we’re doing weird twisting stretches next to a van.

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