

# **HIGH** *when nature & minds meet* **MOUNTAIN INSTITUTE**

**CELEBRATING AN IMPACTFUL TENURE**

**SPRING 2022**



This spring, we are excited to celebrate Head of School Danny O'Brien's contributions to HMI. In this newsletter, you will hear from Danny himself, as well as other folks in the community, about all that HMI has accomplished during his nine years as head of school. We wish Danny and his family wonderful luck as he departs HMI to assume leadership of the Putney School. We trust they will stay close to HMI despite the distance between Leadville and Vermont. In addition to celebrating Danny's final year at HMI, we are excited to offer a glimpse into HMI Gap, share our improved skiing curriculum, introduce our newest campus residents, and celebrate our stellar alumni community. Happy reading!

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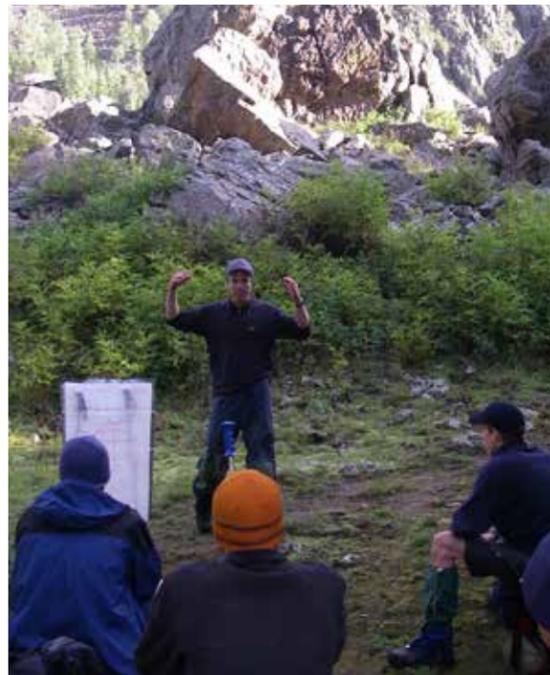


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TO FOLLOW MORE  
OF HMI'S ADVENTURES,  
FIND US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

I have become a better person and stronger leader through engaging with the natural world, being part of an intentional community, and grappling with the most challenging and hard-to-solve problems.



# LEARNINGS FOR A LIFETIME

by Danny O'Brien, Head of School

I joke that the story of my time at the High Mountain Institute is one of the regression of my hairline. Things looked pretty good in the RMS 13 semester photo but began to look a little suspect soon thereafter. By now, I am sure there has to be something wrong with the camera; pictures can lie, right?

The truth is that the story of my time at HMI is so much more than what we can see. My family's coming chapter at the Putney School means this is my final newsletter piece for HMI—the last of dozens I have composed over 18 years. As I write, memories come flooding back. I am full of gratitude for the people who have journeyed alongside me and the places we have traveled. I belong now to the canyons and to the Wind Rivers, the Weminuche, the Collegiates, and the Sawatch. I belong to Leadville and these 80 acres along County Road 5A.

The profoundly important work HMI does will live inside me always. When I think back to my first days here, I see how little I knew then and how much I have learned since. Our mission has been my teacher. I have become a better person and stronger leader through engaging with the natural world, being part of an intentional community, and grappling with the most challenging and hard-to-solve problems.

My experiences at HMI have taught me to do serious work without taking myself too seriously—something we must all do better on a global scale. I started classes by reading Dave Barry's farcical version of American history and found such joy in playing (badly) Animal Kingdom after circle on expeditions. We are much healthier when we incorporate laughter and fun into our learning and work; they do not need to be distinct silos. I have learned, though, that there are limitations to creating opportunities to laugh at yourself: bringing two left boots to the Bears Ears for an expedition—hypothetically, of course—also has ramifications.

There has been so much more as well. Through leading expeditions, I have learned how to keep going when things get hard. I remember once climbing a narrow rock chimney from the canyon floor to the top of a Utah mesa with a small group of teenagers and only the light of the faint sunrise and our

headlamps to guide us. Our pre-dawn mission up the mesa was part of our effort to meet up with our larger group at an agreed-upon time. The canyons are a big place, especially in the dead of winter, and spending a night alone with five adolescents makes them feel bigger. When we made it—a whole 15 minutes before our deadline—I saw my students wearing the smiles only challenge and success can bring. Truth be told, my expression likely mirrored theirs.

Through striving to embrace HMI's culture of feedback, I have learned that your mistakes do not define you as much as your willingness to learn from them. I am thankful for the people who have shared feedback productively with me through the years, helping me expand my self awareness and grow in my understanding of how I impact and influence others. I still try to fit too much into each day, but—trust me—I am far better now about creating a draft agenda and then cutting it in half. These lessons have not always been easy. When people believe in you, however, what you can do better does not define you. What does is the vigor and open mindedness with which you approach these challenges. We need more of this, too, and HMI alumni are out there in the world trying to make it so.

The opportunity to steward HMI has been an honor of my life. I am proud of the ways we have strengthened this school during my tenure. I accepted this position almost a decade ago, determined to build on the legacy of Molly and Christopher Barnes and one day leave HMI better than I found it. We have succeeded, and I am excited to watch HMI continue to grow and improve to meet the demands of new moments. To those of you who have been on this journey with me—my students, colleagues, trustees, and families: thank you. You mean so much to Ellie, Vivie, Henry, and me. Because of this community, I understand what William Butler Yeats meant when he wrote: "Think where a man's glory most begins and ends, and I say my glory was that I had such friends."

I will see you at a reunion down the road.

Warmly,

*Danny*

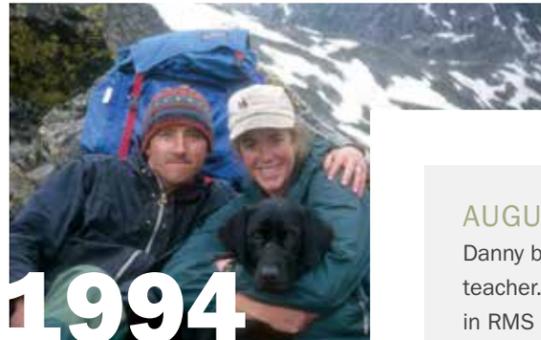
**MAKE A GIFT IN CELEBRATION OF DANNY O'BRIEN AND HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO HMI AT [HMINET.ORG/DONATE!](https://hminet.org/donate)**

# HMI TIMELINE

1 9 9 4 5

## DECEMBER 1994

Molly & Christopher Barnes, along with Peter Neil, hatch the idea for the High Mountain Institute.



1994

## AUGUST 2004

Danny becomes HMI's history teacher. There are 29 students in RMS 13 and kerosene lanterns in the cabins.

## NOVEMBER 2005

Danny begins promoting HMI at schools across the country (he will officially become HMI's first Director of Admissions in fall 2007).



2005

## JULY 2010

Danny leaves HMI to work at Greensboro Day School in North Carolina.

## JANUARY 2011

The West Building and Stuen Hall open.



2011

## SUMMER 2013

Molly and Christopher depart the institution they founded. Danny returns to HMI as Head of School.



2015

## JULY 2019

Four townhomes come online as employee residences, with three single family homes soon to follow.



2019

## SUMMER 2022

HMI's new classroom building nears completion and full renovations of the Barnes and East Buildings begin.



1998

## SEPTEMBER 1998

RMS 1 begins with 21 courageous students.

## MAY 2005

The first of many HMI Fun Runs begins!



2009

## MARCH 2009

The Rocky Mountain Semester receives over 200 applications, a record.



2011

## SUMMER 2011

The Rocky Mountain Semester (RMS) officially changes its name to the HMI Semester. The first HMI Summer Term takes place.



2014

## DECEMBER 2014

HMI receives the largest at-the-time gift in school history (\$500,000) to begin construction on a campus Head of School home.

## JUNE 2017

HMI installs solar panels, which provide for over 100% of the campus's energy needs.



2021

## APRIL 2021

Supported by a \$10,000,000 endowment, HMI awards over \$1,000,000 in financial aid for the first time.

# HEAD OF SCHOOL TRANSITION

By Whitney A. Leonard, Trustee,  
Head of School Search Chair, Semester 7 Alum

**W**ith the departure of Danny O'Brien, HMI has the opportunity to reflect on the achievements of our past leaders while also looking forward toward a new chapter for the school. I am honored to share that moment with all of you as chair of the search for HMI's next Head of School.

I am a Semester 7 alumna (or as we called it back in the day, RMS VII), and I have served on HMI's Board of Trustees since 2016. That means I have had the pleasure of watching HMI grow since its early days under the leadership of HMI's founders, Molly and Christopher Barnes, and then continue to flourish with Danny O'Brien at the helm. I have confidence that HMI's next Head of School will bring vision and passion to continue building on that legacy.

I am thrilled that Amy Roberts, Associate Head of School and Director of the HMI Semester, will be serving as Interim Head of School for the 2022-2023 academic year while our search for a permanent Head is ongoing. Amy has been at HMI since 2019 and served as Acting Head during Danny's sabbatical last year. Energetic and thoughtful, Amy will be an excellent leader and a steady hand during this important transition.

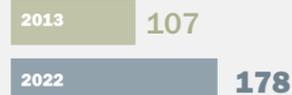
As for the search itself, the Board of Trustees will be working with Storbeck Search (a fantastic team led by Nishant Mehta and Sherry Coleman) to identify a leader who will not only bring talent and experience but will also be a great fit for a school like HMI. We want to hear from alumni—as well as families, faculty, staff, and others connected to the HMI community—and we will be reaching out to get your thoughts on what you want to see in HMI's next leader. With this input, a search committee designated by the Board of Trustees will be responsible for interviewing candidates and making a final recommendation to the full Board.

**You will be hearing more from me over the coming months as that process unfolds. For now, I hope you will join me in thanking Danny for everything he has done for HMI, and in thanking Amy for stepping up to lead during what is sure to be an exciting year for the school. ■**

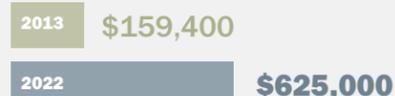


## CONTINUED GROWTH

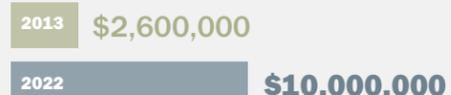
### NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED IN PROGRAMS



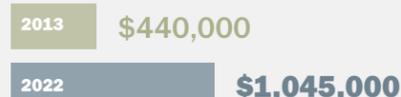
### ANNUAL FUND TOTALS



### ENDOWMENT



### FINANCIAL AID AWARDED



### OPERATING BUDGET



### CAMPUS SIZE



### NET ASSETS



## DANNY O'BRIEN'S LEGACY:

# OPERATING FOR JOY

By Michael Gregoy, former Trustee, Semester 10 Alum



I had spent very little time with Danny O'Brien before I found myself beside him on a multi-day adventure in the spring of 2009. As we zoomed west through Colorado to the Utah desert, Danny's mind was moving even faster than our car. The conversation flew between his ideas for new fundraising methods, novel approaches to marketing, the changing landscape of semester schools, and so on and so on. From the passenger seat, I witnessed a dazzling amount of creative thinking and energized brainpower. But of all the various topics we covered on that long drive, none took up more room than Danny's effort to think of the very best way to surprise, tease, and delight the student group we were about to meet on the rim of Fry Canyon.

Over the last 15 years, I managed to catch Danny in all of his various roles at HMI, and I have gotten to watch Danny at work from many vantage points: first as an alumnus visiting campus, then working for Danny on HMI's first promotional video, and later from HMI's Board of Trustees. I have endless stories of Danny after all of that time. But our drive to Utah sticks out in my mind.

On that trip, so early into our friendship, I learned that Danny's strength comes from dichotomies. He proved to me that seriousness mixes very well with laughter, and that just as much thought should go into the 50,000' view as should go into creating simple, spontaneous moments of joy and

excitement. With Danny, qualities that often seem like contradictions ally to become something richer, more thrilling and dynamic.

In everything he does, Danny is operating for joy. This impulse is intrinsic to his character, but I think it was affirmed when he first arrived at HMI. Those of us who love HMI love it for its grandest outcomes as much as we do for all its component parts: the laughter on the way to class, the rituals of a cook crew, the connections forged when hard work brings together wonderful people somewhere on a mountainside.

In running any sort of institution, it is easy to get lost in the big picture. While serving on the HMI Board of Trustees, I remember all the labor we put into revising the school's mission statement. And I remember at some point, after a long discussion fine-tuning some very earnest language about some very serious ideals, Danny brought us back to earth by saying: "I just don't want us to lose track of the fact that what students do at HMI should also be fun."

At the center of any thriving community there needs to be a healthy reservoir of joy. Alongside so many other laudable accomplishments and so much hard work, Danny has spent the last 15 years as a stalwart champion of joy. This great intangible will remain a resounding part of Danny's legacy at HMI. ■

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# HOW A PANDEMIC PIVOT IS CHANGING THE GAP YEAR

By Claire Sutton, Assistant Director of HMI Gap

The size of HMI's Gap Program has more than doubled since the beginning of the pandemic. It did not always feel like this would be the case. In May 2020, the HMI Gap admissions lines had been all but silent for two months. This led us to reevaluate our growth goals and scale back to two (instead of three) cohorts. At the same time, we scrutinized our practices to prioritize in-person experiences, and we scrambled to develop five weeks of domestic programming as international travel was not possible. Then, in late June, as colleges and universities started to announce their plans for hybrid and fully remote learning for the 2020-21 school year, the phone began ringing—and it did not stop. In July alone we saw a 155% increase in applications. By August, we apologetically shut down our application portal. We simply could not keep up.

The folks who reached out were not typical of the students we have served in the past. They never expected to take a gap year. For many, this marked the first time they had explored the entire ecosystem of thoughtful, structured, and educational gap semester opportunities. They did not step off the academic treadmill, as we encourage in our promotional materials; the pandemic knocked them off.

After months of quarantine, and the realization that there would be no soon return to normal, students and families sought to find meaningful, in-person educational opportunities in lieu of virtual university. After the success of our 2020 summer programming, we were in a strong position to recruit students for fall semesters. We finalized our entirely domestic itineraries and increased our programming capacity by 71%. In the end, HMI Gap served 60 students last year compared to 35 in 2019-2020.

This demand—and our strides to meet it—spurred exciting changes that are now part of our new normal. We now offer an entirely domestic course in the fall and a similar version in the spring. As HMI grows our catalog of offerings, we are striving to remain true to Gap's core values: uniting outdoor adventure, environmental studies, and leadership development in the world's most awe-inspiring places

How does all this play out on our expeditions? I instructed a five-week section of our newly created Traverse semester, a hybrid course of backpacking and rock climbing we created in late July 2020, and into which we immediately accepted 12 students off our waitlist. Almost all these students were taking a very last-minute, unexpected gap year. How would they fare?

The answer is brilliantly. Our students were curious, engaged, and fun—and wildly grateful for the opportunity to be silly, playful, and here, in person. The fall 2020 student cohort is undoubtedly one of the most special communities of which I have been a part in my 10 years of outdoor education. It unequivocally proved to me what we have long thought to be true: that the true merit of gap time is in the opportunity it presents young adults to create a thriving, healthy community where they can live out the fullest version of themselves.

Though many of the students we have served in the past two years did not have a gap year in their original plan, you would be hard-pressed to find one that regrets it. Now, more than ever, students need the opportunity to focus on who they are outside their families, and outside the classroom, to intentionally transition into adulthood. My little silver lining from these dreary two years is that we got to help more young people do just that. ■



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## GAP SEMESTERS

### TREK

Backpacking-focused courses in the American West and Chilean Patagonia

### ROCK

Climbing-focused courses in the American West and Chilean Patagonia

### TRAVERSE

A semester that combines backpacking and climbing skillsets in the American West

# SLIDING ON SNOW:

## MAKING SKIING MORE FUN & INCLUSIVE

By Justin Talbot, Director of Wilderness Programs & Risk Management



Over the last several years, we have examined every part of our school and program through the lens of equity and inclusion. These steps have led to some tangible changes that we've already implemented on campus: expanding the comprehensiveness of our financial aid packages, issuing Chromebooks to all students, and adding a Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. This semester, we are adjusting our ski programming to ensure that students who have never skied before, or who did not grow up in winter environments, are prepared for the rigors of winter expedition.

Ski Week, the week leading up to our spring winter expedition, has been a true highlight of the spring semester for both HMI students and staff since it began in Semester 14. Most years, we spend four or five days skiing at our local ski hill, Ski Cooper. New skiers learn to ski for the first time, and even the most experienced skiers are challenged with the new skill of telemark skiing—like downhill skiing but without your heels locked down. Telemark skiing makes winter travel easier than downhill skiing because you are able to ski both up and down, but is also a bit more challenging to master.

In the past, Ski Week was great for helping expert alpine skiers master the telemark turn, and for our brand-new skiers

to make it down a groomed beginner slope. Our days at Ski Cooper, however, did not do enough to help prepare students to ski in variable snow conditions, on ungroomed tracks, and up steep hills. These are the conditions all students encounter on our winter expedition, so we set out to redesign Ski Week to be a more authentic preparation for the experience.

This year, in order to better support students of all ability levels, we made several changes to our Ski Week curriculum. In the weeks leading up to the winter expedition, we switched from our standard running morning exercise to nordic skiing so that students got a lot of experience sliding on snow before Ski Week. Ski Week itself also looked a little different than in past years. We started by taking our telemark skis to nearby groomed nordic trails to learn the basics of how to go up and down gentle hills before moving on to steeper terrain at the ski area. In subsequent days at Ski Cooper, we focused on small group coaching, particularly for newer skiers. We wrapped up the week with a fun day of backcountry skiing in our expedition groups, before leaving for the winter trip.

We are confident that more ski practice and support will lead to a more fun winter expedition! ■

# THE HMI CHICKEN COOP CO-OP

By Amy Roberts, Associate Head of School & Semester Program Director

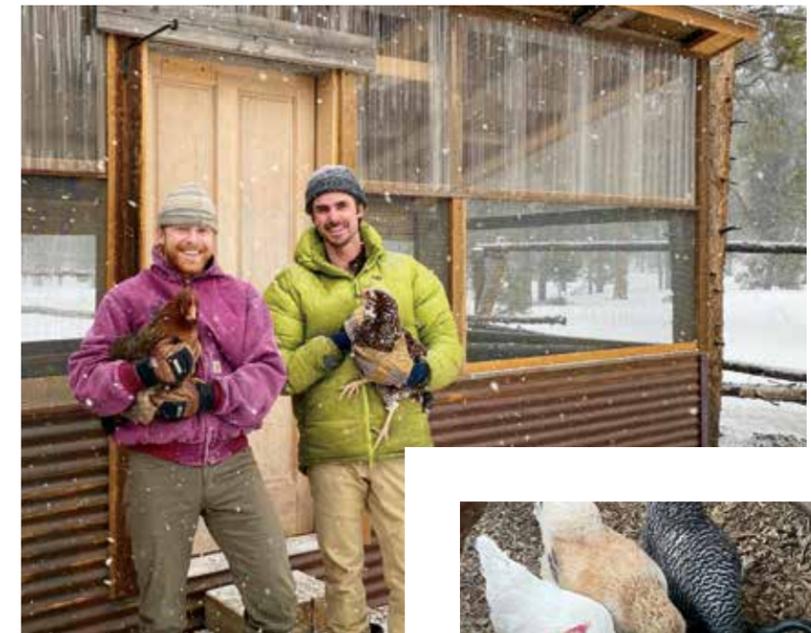
## BWOK! BWOK! BWOK!

It is 6 a.m., the sun is rising over the HMI campus, and the early morning peace has been shattered by the clucking of 20 brightly-feathered chickens, the newest and noisiest residents of Grey Jay Way.

The coop is abuzz with squawks and fluttering wings as the flock, which includes stately Russian Orloffs, easygoing Wyandottes, and fluffy, five-toed Salmon Faverolles, prepares for a busy day of egg laying and strutting around their coop.

It has been just over a year since the hens arrived on campus and HMI residents decided to form a chicken coop co-op. Originally hatched as a pandemic project, the co-op has helped to create a sense of community and shared responsibility among residents; every household is a member of the co-op and residents have weekly chicken tending, coop cleaning, and egg delivery duties. The hens have even managed to build a fledgling Instagram following since their arrival.

Coop construction began in earnest during the summer of 2020. Led by Chicken Coop Chief Operating Officer Dirk Rasmussen (partner of Director of Communication and Engagement Barrett Donovan) and Director of Summer Programs and Wilderness Coordinator Dave Clark-Barol, the coop incorporates many remnants of HMI's history. The building, comprised of a heated sleeping roost as well as an indoor and outdoor run, is made of



more than 90% reclaimed or salvaged materials ranging from repurposed cabin doors, Tyvek expedition ground cloths, and original metal roofing from the Barnes building.

Once the coop was built, Dirk and Barrett traveled to Sunshine Mesa Farm in Hotchkiss, CO to fetch the flock and egg-laying began in earnest. On good days, the hens produce about 8-10 eggs in gorgeous shades of light brown, green, and blue. Most of these farm-fresh eggs end up scrambled or fried, delicious breakfast treats for residents. During the winter months, production goes down, but the hens are still delightful companions.

When asked about the coop, Dirk said: "Spending time with the hens is very meditative. Observing individual



personalities and the social dynamics of the flock is fascinating. It's deeply satisfying that we tend a flock of birds who are descendants of dinosaurs. Eggs are a bonus." ■



FOLLOW THE CHICKENS ON INSTAGRAM

@hmichickencoopcoop

# RECORD BREAKING SUMMIT CHALLENGE

By Barrett Donovan, Director of Communication & Engagement,  
Semester 26 Alum

Every year, HMI alumni come together to raise money for financial aid at HMI during the HMI Summit Challenge. This year, we raised over \$150,000, with about 30% of Semester alumni making a contribution. Most student's time at HMI is only four months long, but the impact it has on their lives often makes it stand out as one of the most important experiences in their educational journey. This is what makes the HMI alumni community so strong—a shared understanding of the magic of HMI, and an intense desire for others to be able to experience it too.

This year, we broke our Summit Challenge record with the help of over 500 alumni donors and a generous matching gift from Semester 19 alum, Keith Snyder. When asked about his time at HMI and his tremendous support of the Summit Challenge this year, Keith said:

“There are few experiences in one's life which you can point to and say, with confidence, this changed the trajectory of my life. For me, HMI provided that experience, which is why I think it's so important to give back to this incredible organization. With this gift, I hope that future generations will have the same opportunity to take part in this life changing experience while also encouraging my fellow alumni to donate.”

This is what makes the HMI alumni community so strong—a shared understanding of the magic of HMI, and an intense desire for others to be able to experience it too.



Our fantastic Alumni Council helps coordinate and fundraise for the Summit Challenge each year, and we are so grateful for their support, insight, and enthusiasm. Colleen Orr, Semester 27 alum and Chair of the Alumni Council Outreach Committee, shared: “I credit HMI for many decisions I've made in my life. HMI helped me build confidence, step out of my comfort zone and move away from home for the first time. It cemented my desire to study environmental science and put Colorado College (CC) at the top of my list, given CC's similar ethos about experiential learning. And without financial aid, attending HMI would not have been possible for me. That's why I love the Summit Challenge; HMI alumni see the value in their education and choose to make this experience possible for future students. Thank you, alumni, for making this year the best we've had yet!”

**From all of us at HMI, thank you so much to everyone who helped make this year's Summit Challenge such a wild success! We are inspired by your support and enthusiasm on a daily basis.**



**30%**  
**HMI alumni  
participation**

**vs. 10%**

**the average National Association  
of Independent School participation**

**HIGH MOUNTAIN INSTITUTE**

531 County Road 5A  
Leadville, CO 80461  
TEL 719-486-8200

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Excited to visit campus,  
take a trip down memory lane,  
see campus, and share HMI  
with your family and friends?

**SAVE THE DATE!**  
**HMI 25-YEAR REUNION**  
**IN LEADVILLE!**  
**June 9 – 11, 2023**



**25-YEAR  
REUNION**