

HIGH *when nature & minds meet* MOUNTAIN INSTITUTE

SPRING 2025 NEWSLETTER





THROUGH OUR LENS

Scenes from Semesters 53, 54, and Fall '24 HMI Gap



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NAVIGATING A CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE



By Sam Critchlow, Head of School

On November 11, 2024, a satellite text message went out to the four HMI expeditions in the canyons of Utah: “Election Results. President: Trump, Senate: Republican, House: Still up for grabs. Please use the curriculum provided and pass on this news on the last night.”

The 2024 election, like past elections and many major news events, happened over expedition for Semester 53 students, faculty, and apprentices. After much debate, the expedition groups had asked that we withhold the results until the closing hours of their trip, thereby preserving the sanctity of their wilderness experience. In the weeks and months that followed, HMI, like many schools in America, has felt the need to reevaluate and reaffirm its priorities and values. What follows are just a few areas of our work that have come into sharp focus in the early months of the second Trump Administration.

Utah’s Bears Ears National Monument, where our students were backpacking on election day, has been a battleground of federal, state, and tribal politics for decades. When I was a teacher at HMI (2007-11), the area had few protections of its cultural heritage and natural sites. In the years and administrations that followed, the area gained national monument status, had its borders dramatically shrunk, then expanded again. Now, the Department of the Interior has already indicated that it intends to shrink Bears Ears once again in the name of resource extraction and deregulation.

We will continue to travel to Bears Ears, regardless of land management status, emphasizing wonder, respect, and a light foot. But while HMI is not a political advocacy organization, preserving access to and opposing the sale of public lands are clearly in the interests of our mission and programs, and we will continue to advocate and educate to these ends.

With increased federal immigration enforcement looming, many schools have adopted policies designed to preserve educational facilities as safe havens from law enforcement activities. At HMI, we recognize the importance of providing a safe learning and residential environment for all students regardless of citizenship status. To this end, we have adopted policies limiting law enforcement access to our campus, except when invited, in the case of emergency, or when a judicially-signed warrant is presented. We are lucky to have a strong relationship with local law enforcement in Lake County and have confidence in their dedication to preserving public safety and community trust above any federal agenda.

Finally, I write this as many government, business, and educational institutions are rolling back their efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, following executive orders threatening federal funding. I want to assure our alumni, families, friends, and future students that HMI stands by the core values contained in our strategic plan and Diversity & Inclusion Statement, which concludes: *we are committed to building an exceptional learning environment rooted in community—not just for some, but for all who seek to be inspired by the natural world.* We value diversity in our

student and adult communities and remain steadfast in supporting our community members from marginalized and underrepresented backgrounds. At HMI, this means continuing efforts to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of our students, staff, and trustees, remaining committed in our recognition and support of our gender-diverse community members, and continuing to critically examine our culture and curriculum to ensure HMI is inclusive and welcoming to all.

As an independent school, HMI is afforded some level of protection from federal mandates that target the public sector. Still, there are ways that antagonistic federal agencies could threaten our operations. While we do not know what the future holds, I am heartened by the coalition of organizations similar to HMI (such as NOLS, Outward Bound, and hundreds of independent schools) communicating, collaborating, and advocating through this uncertain time. We are not alone in our concerns, nor in our commitments.

HMI REMAINS COMMITTED TO:

- ▶ **Preserving access to and opposing the sale of public lands**
- ▶ **Providing a safe learning and residential environment for all students regardless of citizenship status**
- ▶ **Valuing diversity and working to increase equity and inclusion within our community**



MEET OUR NEW SEMESTER CO-DIRECTORS SERGIO & TATE

As of fall, 2024, the HMI Semester is now led by two co-directors: Sergio Juárez, who oversees student & residential life, and Tate Castro who oversees academics and faculty. We sat down with Sergio & Tate to ask them about their backgrounds, connections to HMI, and if they've ever started a ski team in a Middle Eastern desert city.



“It has been endearing to help shape an institution that aligns so much with my beliefs and values of what education should and can be.”
—Sergio Juárez





DIRECTOR OF STUDENTS & RESIDENTIAL LIFE

Sergio Juárez

Tell us a bit about yourself. Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Chihuahua, Mexico. After college, I spent 10 years in Chile, then six years in Dubai, and four in New Hampshire, and now I'm here! I've always worked in education, especially in outdoor education.

How did you originally fall in love with the outdoors?

I think it was a mix of 1) the National Geographic magazines that were delivered to my house every month, and 2) my parents' adventurous spirit. They had a Westfalia VW bus, which we used to travel all over Mexico. My dad was a scuba diving instructor, so I got to experience ocean life from a young age, and then eventually I took it upon myself to expand into mountaineering, rock climbing, and so on.



Skiing in the mall in Dubai!

Tell us about the ski team you started in *checks notes* Dubai!?

Yeah, it turns out that in Dubai—the land of contrasts and luxury—they have a ski hill inside one of their malls. It's actually a pretty decent place to go skiing. And since the international school where I worked had a sister school in Switzerland with a team, we decided to start training a ski team at the mall. We would take students there two or three times a week and we started traveling to the Alps to compete each winter. At first, we were clearly the underdogs but by our third winter, we started winning! I think we had such fast success because when you are on a climatized ski hill, your season is all year long. And



Sergio & Santiago

when you have the exact same pitch and snow quality, you can really work on refining your racing skills. So by the time we arrived at the competition, our technique was very dialed. And obviously, my students were very committed, very hardworking. In the end, it rendered a few medals and a lot of surprise and admiration from our European counterparts!

You are an HMI dad. What was it like to have Santiago do HMI Gap last fall?

I think there were a few very important lines of connection when Santi did the Rock Gap semester. First, I've been rock climbing since I was a teenager and he's been rock climbing since he was just a little bit older than a toddler. And he loves it. But for him to take it upon himself and go learn more from other people and get really involved in a program that provides that experience and those climbing skills was super valuable.

Secondly, he's always attended the schools where I work so for him to still enroll in a program at my new school makes that connection so much more meaningful. I find purpose in what I do. I love the institutions I work for—even more so because they are also helping me shape my son into a better version of himself.

You are 1.5 semesters into your new role at HMI. What's it been like?

It has been endearing to help shape an institution that aligns so much with my beliefs and values of what education should and can be. And it's been rewarding to see students grow so much in such a short time. I was originally a little skeptical about how much we can really impact a student in four months. But after seeing the first semester go through, I was blown away with how well the program works and how much meaningful gain we produce in a very short time.



DIRECTOR OF ACADEMICS & FACULTY

Tate Castro

Tell us a bit about yourself. Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Los Angeles, in the big city. I really enjoyed growing up there. I went to some great schools and one of them sent a ton of kids to HMI so I learned about HMI pretty early on in middle school and was super jazzed about it. When it was time for me to get the opportunity to go, I was so excited!



Apprentice Tate in Semester 44 (Spring '20)

You were a student in HMI Semester 27 in fall, 2011. How did that experience impact you?

My experience here was pretty life-changing. It really changed the lens through which I viewed the world and myself in it. It impacted how I consume things, and my role in being a good steward of the environment. It also showed me the power of what a community can do for somebody—how being a part of a community can change a person and help them grow. From 16, I was very hooked on the power of this place and this community.

HMI seems like a place you keep coming back to. How have you stayed involved over the years?

I was a student in 2011, an apprentice for Semester 44 in 2020, and on the Alumni Council from 2020 to 2024. Now, I work here. It has been such a pleasure to give back to a place that has given so much to me. Seeing students go through what I went through and transform—this is what education is

all about. It fills my cup and brings me joy. This is what I dreamed about at 16. It really is a dream come true.

What professional roles have led you back to HMI?

I earned my undergrad degree in education and then spent seven years in the summer camp industry as a camp director and executive director in Los Angeles, gaining insight into programming and logistics. I also have a master's in counseling, which is incredibly helpful in working with people. Education, programming, and human interaction are the core of HMI. I feel uniquely prepared to use my skills to help improve this place.

You are 1.5 semesters into your new role. What's it been like?

It's been a wild ride. I showed up in the fall, the same day the students showed up, so I feel a deep connection with Semester 53 students. It's been really great to come back to a place that feels familiar but is changing in great ways to better the student and adult experience. At its core, the student experience is still very similar to what I had. Talking to alums from Semester 1 or 2, their experience sounds similar too. It's awesome to see that fundamentally, we are doing the same thing we were in 1998. It feels really good that we've kept the core values of HMI while still improving around the margins.

How's Leadville been treating you?

I love Leadville. Coming from LA, it's pretty much the polar opposite, but being in a place that feels like a community—where I go to the grocery store and see people I know—feels really grounding. Ever since HMI, I've been looking for community, and this is the first time since I was a student that I've been in a place for an extended period where I feel like I'm a part of it rather than just a face in the crowd. It feels really great to put down roots.



Student Tate in Semester 27 (Fall '11)

Semester 53 Scrapbook

Designed by Keira Obert,
Admissions and Marketing Fellow



There's something about backpacking through the canyons of Utah that feels like stepping into another world. What I love most about backpacking in Utah's canyons, though, is the way laughter echoes through the walls. After a long day of hiking, the sound of my friends' voices would bounce off the canyon walls, filling the vast emptiness. There's something about being so far from everything that makes those moments feel richer, more meaningful. In those canyons, you feel the immensity of the world, but you also feel a deep sense of belonging like you're part of something much bigger than yourself.

-Roxie



We come from hot showers and cold glasses of water at the press of a button or the turn of a handle, symptoms of a society in abject disconnect from its land and natural resources. The desert teaches you to appreciate where your luxuries come from. It simultaneously makes you acknowledge that they are just that—luxuries, foibles of a consumeristic society. However, as off-color Edward Abbey writes in *Desert Solitaire*, "[w]ilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit." Walking, climbing, and sometimes wading through the canyons was an experience to remember. Ten days in the desert gives you ten million reasons to protect it.

-Xavier



artwork by Charlie



Memories in Leadville!



My personal favorite part of expedition is "Circle." This is where we all gather together in a circle and talk about life. Through Circle, I connected with all my friends so much more, learning details about them that I would have never known if it wasn't for this awesome opportunity. One question, from Third Exped that really stood out to me, is "What is something you value about yourself and why?" I love these questions because they help us to step outside our comfort zones, and I admire people's passion toward their answers.

-Lucas



Bears Ears National Monument

Living in Cabin Two has easily been one of the best parts of my experience here at HMI. For teenage girls, it can often be hard to find an all female space where everyone feels cared for and supported, but Cabin Two is one of those rare spaces that does exactly that. There is no judgement or jealousy. I have gotten to know the seven other girls in my cabin so well over the past few months, and every day I am more grateful that I get to live with them. Who wouldn't want to have a slumber party with their best friends every single night?

-Alden



HMI'S APPROACH TO WILDFIRE PREPAREDNESS

By Ray McGaughey, Director of Development

Photo credit: Steve Sunday

On a Tuesday afternoon in June, 2024, a plume of smoke started to rise about ten miles south of HMI's campus. Word spread rapidly between HMI employees and residents: a wildfire had sprung up by Twin Lakes. We would come to learn that an abandoned campfire had sparked the blaze, which ultimately burned more than 700 acres of National Forest land and took firefighters two weeks to extinguish.

It's no secret that wildfires have increased in their frequency and ferocity across the American West. In Colorado, all 20 of the 20 largest wildfires in recorded history have occurred since 2001, the three largest taking place in 2020. While Leadville and the high Rockies have a low risk of wildfire during the roughly seven snow-covered months of the year, our region becomes extremely vulnerable to human and nature-initiated fires during the summer.

Insurance companies have taken notice, and HMI has endured head-spinning property insurance increases in recent years with no reprieve in sight. Since 2019, HMI's premiums have increased eightfold, rising from \$26,000 to \$226,000 just four years later. Property insurance has become so costly that the HMI Board of Trustees made the decision last year to partially self-insure against the risk of a catastrophic loss, a strategy adopted by many western schools unable to afford (or in some cases, even

WILDFIRE MITIGATION EFFORTS

Here are some of the mitigation efforts we have accomplished in the past five years:

- ▶ **Removed** nearly all trees within 30 feet of buildings
- ▶ **Thinned out** the woodland portion of campus by roughly 20%
- ▶ **Replaced the wooden sidings** on cabins with fire retardant materials
- ▶ **Constructed cisterns** to store 50,000 gallons of water throughout our campus for emergency use
- ▶ **Improved emergency vehicle access** to our campus by constructing new roads and access points
- ▶ **Moved all cabin firewood** away from the sides of cabins during summer time



We are proud of the steps we are taking towards wildfire preparedness, but aware that it is just that: preparedness, not prevention. The combination of increasing temperatures and drought due to climate change, underfunded federal oversight agencies, and increased recreation in the Rocky Mountains ensure that HMI will need to center wildfires in its planning for the foreseeable future.

obtain) insurance. The effects of the recent Los Angeles wildfires, the costliest in history, on future premiums are not yet known.

In addition to the economic implications, wildfire risk has become the central lens through which we maintain and improve our 80-acre campus, about half of which is lodgepole pine woodland. "Wildfire risk and mitigation has been a concern at HMI for years," says Justin Talbot, Director of Wilderness Programs and Risk Management, "but while we used to prioritize forest health over mitigation, we are now forced to take the opposite approach. We are no longer planting new trees and have begun thinning our tree-cover, creating more defensible space around buildings, and taking other steps to reduce fire risk." The Forest Service, too, has begun aggressively thinning the forest land around HMI. Hundreds of acres around Turquoise Lake have been clear cut or thinned since 2018, leaving conspicuous gaps in the forest but removing fuels for future conflagrations.

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A helicopter at the Twin Lakes fire in June, 2024



THE WINTER TRIP

Photo by Justin Talbot,
Director of Wilderness Programs and Risk Management

The Winter Trip is a once-in-a-lifetime achievement for spring semester students who spend ten days winter camping in the mountains around Leadville. Students travel on backcountry skis, pulling sleds behind them, and sleep in hollowed-out mounds of snow called “Quigloos.” Justin Talbot, HMI’s most tenured employee and resident professional photographer, has spent over 300 days winter camping with HMI students and staff members. He recently returned from the Semester 54 Winter Trip with another round of fabulous photos.





SCAN THE QR CODE
TO SEE MORE
WINTER TRIP PHOTOS!





ABBY WAISLER ON WORKING IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY, THE ERAS TOUR, AND BEYOND



Abby Waisler
Semester 45

- HMI Semester 45; Fall 2020
- Crossroads School for Arts & Sciences (CA) Class of 2022
- Bates College (ME) Class of 2026

I arrived at HMI in the early months of COVID-19, without an ability to understand how life-saving the experience would be.

As Zoom became my left-behind peers’ classroom, the canyons of Cedar Mesa and climbs of the Sawatch mountains became mine. I felt present and grounded where I was for the first time in my life. But what was the most unexpected and lucky was the skills that HMI taught me, and all of the ways they have guided me through my work and life in the years since.

Over the past few years, I have been fortunate to work in a very strange, unique field of work. My years have been split into two sections: the months of the year when I am in college in Maine, and the months where I travel to close and far-away countries, living on a tour bus and photographing live music. My life during these non-academic times consist of working into the wee hours of the mornings, often falling asleep on a moving vehicle, and waking up in a country I have never been to. It’s pretty strange and really wonderful. Through this work, I have toured on Taylor Swift’s *The Eras Tour*, gone on long runs through Hyde Park in London (a practice that I have carried from AMX on Country Road 5A), and explored the locker rooms of almost every NFL football stadium in the country.

When I started touring, it became immediately apparent that there is a huge issue with environmental sustainability within the music industry. The amount of energy and natural resources required to put a tour on is astronomical, and conceptualizing how much waste is created from merchandise, streaming, and the technology required to make the industry run is mind boggling. That is why it has become a goal of mine to work towards a sustainable industry, both on small-scale and systematic levels.

HMI taught me to be a leader and the value of community and the fulfillment found in hard work. But the greatest lesson I gained from my semester was how important it is to be a good steward of the world around me. On expedition we learned how to leave a place better than we found it. And that lesson is a practice I have tried to bring into every day of my life since leaving campus on December 11, 2020.

Next spring I will be writing my undergraduate thesis on sustainability initiatives within the music industry. Being an environmental studies student has propelled the lessons I learned about stewardship at HMI. Everyday I bring these lessons to life, and I will continue to work towards leaving this field better than I found it.

P.S. Semester 45 I love you forever!!!!!!



ABBY’S PHOTOGRAPHY RESUME

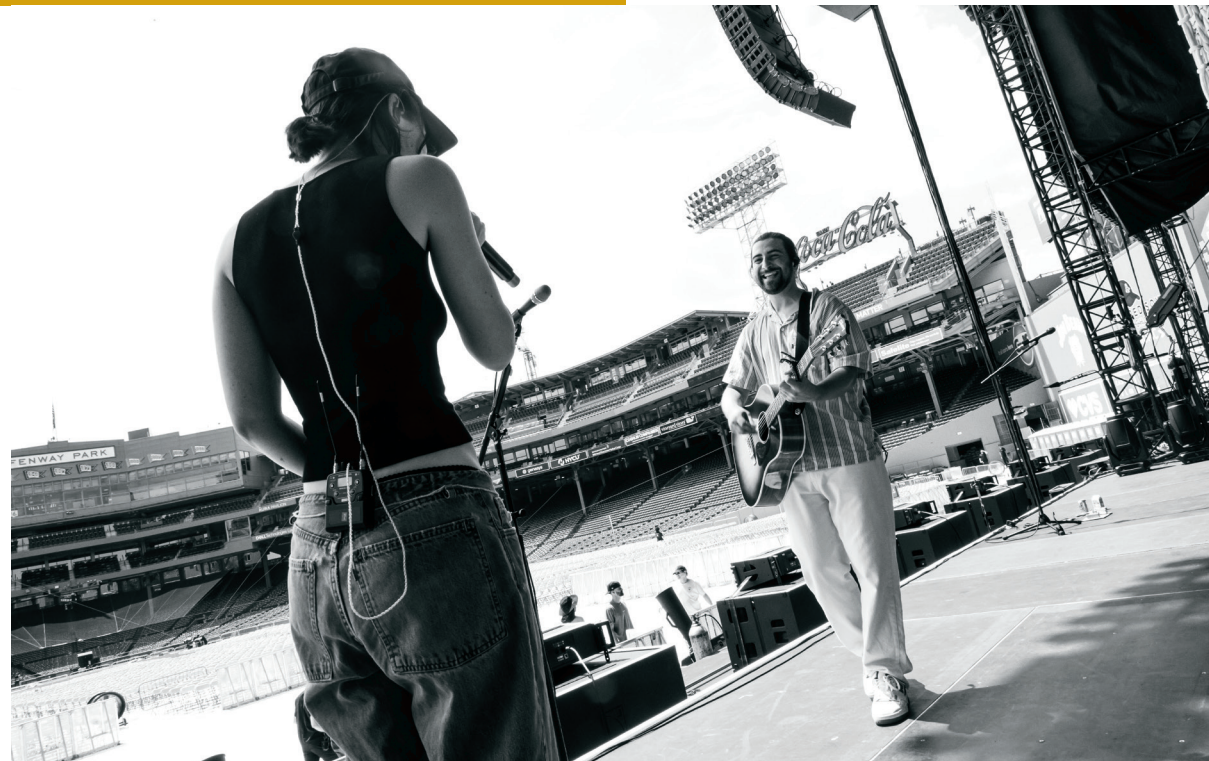
- **Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour** (Gracie Abrams Support) 2023-2024
- **Laufey: The Goddess Tour** 2024
- **Gracie Abrams:** The Good Riddance Tour and The Secret of Us Tour 2023-2024
- **Clients include:** Chanel, Pandora, Wildflower Cases, and more



Find Abby’s photos in **Vogue**, **Rolling Stone**, **Billboard**, and on Instagram at [instagram.com/abbywaisler](https://www.instagram.com/abbywaisler)



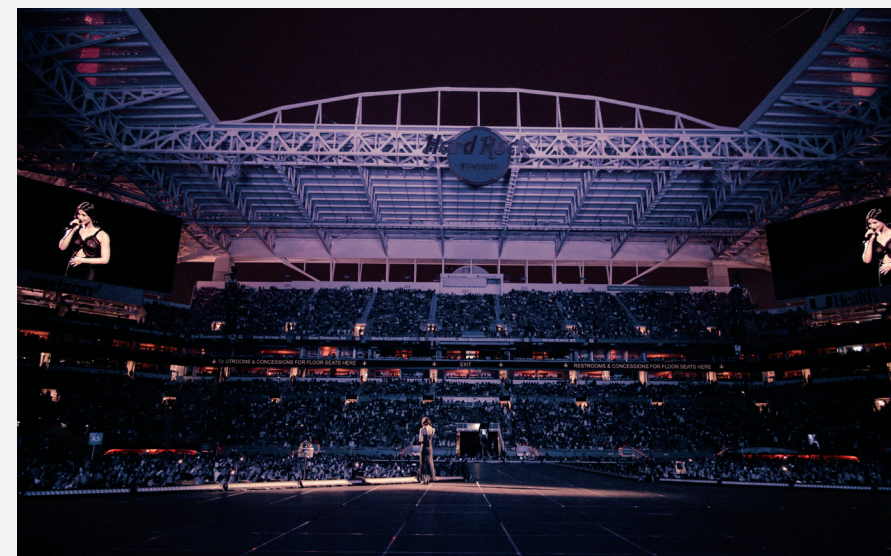
ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT, CONTINUED



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ABBY'S PHOTOS:

PAGE 20:
Noah Kahan & Gracie Abrams at Fenway Park

PAGE 21:
Laufey in Montreal

PAGE 22:
Top:
Noah Kahan & Gracie Abrams rehearsing at Fenway Park

Bottom:
Gracie Abrams in Vancouver

PAGE 23:
Top:
Gracie Abrams at Radio City Music Hall
Bottom:
Gracie Abrams in Miami

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ALUMNI TRIPS

HMI ALUMNI TRIPS ARE BACK!

Alumni trips are open to all HMI alumni, apprentices, former staff, and their friends and family.
All alumni trips can be run as a custom trip with 4+ people.

CURRENT TRIPS:

- ▶ **SAWATCH BACKPACKING** | Saturday, August 2 - Saturday, August 9, 2025
- ▶ **FALL FOLIAGE 14ERS** | Thursday, October 2 - Sunday October 5, 2025

TO LEARN MORE, VISIT: hminet.org/alumnitrips

