

HIGH *when nature & minds meet* MOUNTAIN INSTITUTE

SPRING 2026 NEWSLETTER





COMMUNITY

THROUGH OUR LENS

Scenes from Semester 56 (Spring '26) and Fall '25 HMI Gap



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SCAN TO
CONNECT



LEARNING TO LET GO (OF PHONES)

By Sam Critchlow, Head of School

This summer, an alumnus from Semester 21 (Fall '08) stopped by campus during his cross-country drive. As we reminisced about his semester, he asked me if I remembered discovering his “secret iPhone” on First Expedition.

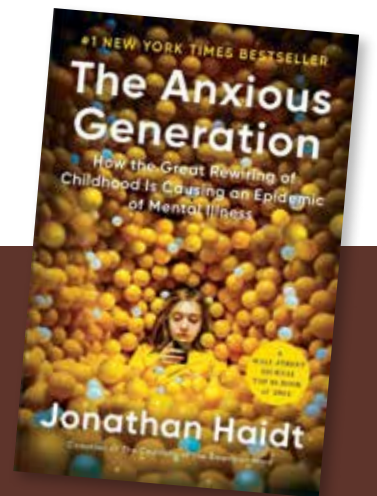
I laughed and thought back. 2008 was the year Facebook overtook MySpace, and when the much-anticipated iPhone 3G was released. Sending a text message on my flip phone required navigating the clunky nine-digit keyboard and cost 15 cents per text. I did remember that contraband iPhone, but more memorable still was my wonder at the thought that anyone could be that attached to a phone! Little did I know how much the world was about to change.



In the years that followed, teenage daily screen time climbed and climbed, peaking at nearly nine hours per day (!) in 2023. And, like most adults, my screen time increased too, as smartphones became essential and inescapable tools of work and personal life. In his 2024 book *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt chronicles the replacement of the “play-based childhood” with the “phone-based childhood” during this same period, contributing to a multitude of mental health and social-emotional development issues in young people. Along with the growing ubiquity of smartphones and social media, Haidt identifies a flawed “safetyism” in adults as a contributing factor. Parents have become harmfully overprotective of children in the real world, while underestimating the risks children face in digital spaces. Importantly, taking away phones is only part of the proper cure: what you replace them with matters just as much.

HMI has proudly banned cell phones in our Semester and summer programming for over 20 years. Students turn their phones in on the first day of their program and don't see them again until their departure day. In the place of phones we substitute in a variety of activities, tools, and toys: guitars, arts supplies, cornhole, hacky sack, a climbing hall, impromptu kitchen dance parties, cookie baking, wood chopping, snow sculpting, and cabin life, to name a few. And some of the healthy risks and challenges that have become rarer in everyday life are front and center at HMI: the opportunity to explore, to cook (and perhaps burn) dinner for all your friends, to negotiate interpersonal relationships (and manage conflict) face-to-face, and to share your authentic self in a new community.

When I returned to HMI in 2023, I was curious about how the phone ban was going. Were students more resistant to giving up these increasingly capable, essential, and addictive devices? In my first weeks on campus, I asked a Summer Term student how it felt to be phone-free for the first time in years. She paused, thought for a moment, and said “it’s... a relief.” This sentiment is among the most common I hear from HMI students in recent years. In their application essays, several current Semester 56 students wrote of how much they were looking forward to relinquishing their phones. At a recent lunch, a student teased “look at those screenagers!” – pointing to my table, where three adults had phones out. Several semesters have opted into student-led “tech free” times on campus. Are we at a tipping point on who’s leading this low-tech revolution? At HMI, it sure looks that way. As we all struggle and learn to adapt to a faster-changing world, I feel reassured that our mantra “simple in means, rich in ends” is as relevant, rewarding, and important as ever. And I feel reassured (“secret iPhones” of yesteryear aside) that our students are increasingly leading the charge.



“Haidt chronicles the replacement of the “play-based childhood” with the “phone-based childhood,” contributing to a multitude of mental health and social-emotional development issues in young people.

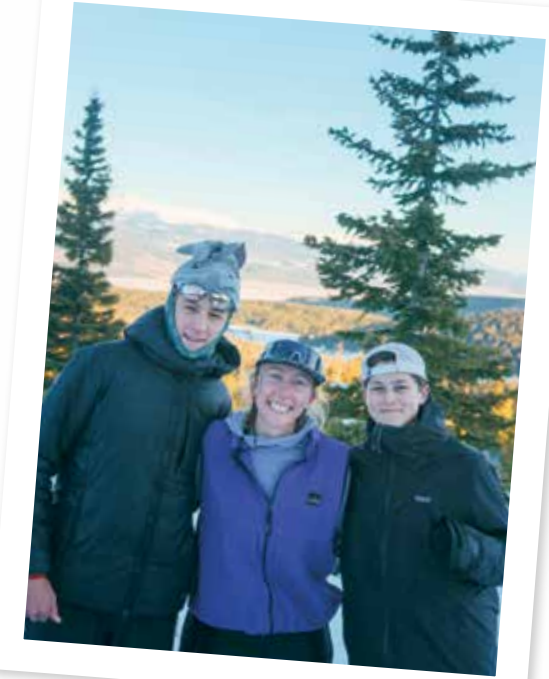


SEMESTER 56

IN ITS OWN WORDS...

By Lindsey Geer, Admissions Associate

As Semester 56 wrapped up their first academic block on campus, I sat down with four students to talk about their first 40 days at HMI, what they've learned, and what brought them to Leadville.



TATE BUTLER

HOMETOWN: Washington, D.C.

SCHOOL: The Potomac School

Why did you choose to come to HMI?

I think that I was kind of stuck in the same rotation at my old school. It was a lot of pen and paper, and a lot of uncomfortable comparison to other kids. When Simon [from HMI] came to my school, my eyes lit up a little bit! It was something I had never done before and something I never thought I would do. I'm at the point in junior year where I want to try new things, and this seemed like such a cool opportunity that you're only going to get once. I had to pull the trigger!

What's something you've enjoyed from this first academic block?

The relationship between students and teachers is so unique here, because our teachers are more like our friends than our teachers. They don't teach us in a way that makes it seem like they know more than us. Instead, they encourage critical thinking and being ourselves. There's less note-taking and sitting and listening, and more ability to actually contribute and grow.



GENESIS LANDA-POSAS

HOMETOWN: Aurora, CO
SCHOOL: Colorado Academy

Why did you want to come to HMI?

I chose to come to HMI because my sister Galilea (Semester 43) encouraged me, and told me that it was going to be a life-changing opportunity. Now I'm here!



What's cabin life like?

So fun! Going back to my cabin at night is my favorite part of the day. We all sit around the fire and talk and laugh, and it's so nice. It's crazy to think that I have six roommates, but it doesn't feel crowded at all. We all get along very well, so it's great! I also love the community in general — I feel very much like I can be myself, and be very happy and joyous and hyper, and everyone around me goes along with it.



What made you decide to come to HMI?

I wanted to come to HMI because I love to learn, but a lot of times, our education system is so rigid, and it's hard to connect what we're learning to something deeper or more meaningful. I particularly love our discussions in history and English class, because they represent the difference in education here versus at home. They're so interactive and thought-provoking — English isn't about grammar, it's about making sense of the world around us.

What are you proudest of from the past few weeks?

At first, I was kind of worried about coming out of my shell, and when I got back from the first expedition, I was worried about how it would feel to be in such a big group again. I went for it! I played Blood on the Clock Tower and other games with everyone, sang songs, and I'm so glad that I took that leap. It's amazing to see the mountains all of the time, and be able to go on a walk in the middle of the day and feel the fresh air. Everyone here is so welcoming. There's so many people that I trust here and feel so loved by!



ELLA HAMEL

HOMETOWN: Newtonville, MA
SCHOOL: Newton North High School



ELISABETH SCOTT

HOMETOWN: Charlottesville, VA
SCHOOL: Tandem Friends School

What's been a favorite memory from life in Leadville the past couple of weeks?

My Ski Week group was so much fun! On the last day, when I was finally learning how to do telemark turns and lift my heel, we did a relay race where the reward was peanut butter cups. My team couldn't actually get our bindings on — I think that getting the bindings on is harder than actually skiing — so we did end up losing, but we all got peanut butter cups anyways. We also did some practice falling into tons of snow, fully in the woods, and it was really hard to get back up, so we all just fell in a circle and laughed. It was so fun!

Any unexpected highlights?

I love cook crew (as long as it's not breakfast and I don't have to wake up early), and another odd thing that I've come to love is my chore. Franny and I get to clean the laundry room together, and it's so much fun getting to be in there with just the two of us, cleaning and mopping and sweeping. Having a place that we are solely responsible for is special, because when we go back and see it clean, it's so rewarding! It's also so fun to spend that time with a friend.



LA LENGUA DE LA POLÍTICA

The Language of Politics

By Amos Pomp, Spanish Faculty,
and Maple Buescher, Semester 56 Lead Apprentice



This semester, the HMI World Languages Department is offering a new Spanish elective, La Lengua de la Política (The Language of Politics). In this class we are challenging students with questions like, “What do we mean when we talk about ‘politics?’” “What actually is fascism, and how have people like Francisco Franco justified it?” And, “How does Bad Bunny’s music resist imperialism?”

Here’s what Amos and Maple have to say about their new course:

AMOS

This spring, for the first time in recent memory, HMI was very fortunate to have a fall apprentice—Maple Buescher—return for a second semester as the Semester 56 Lead Apprentice (apprentices typically only work at HMI for a single semester). Having Maple as a returning apprentice has opened so many doors for us in the Spanish classroom. At the start of this semester, Maple and I asked ourselves how we could expand on our creative ideas from the fall, which are usually limited by the scope of a single semester, a new mentor-apprentice relationship, and the need to cover certain grammar topics. Maple and I are both linguistics and etymology nerds, and we share the strong belief that language, and language classes, are political, so it wasn’t a huge leap for us to decide that our spring class should be about the language of politics. We want to use this semester to encourage our students to dive into the questions that we usually only skim the surface of, often due to limited time or the

challenge of talking in Spanish about complex political topics. And we want to do so using the power of words themselves.

For example, the word el fascismo (fascism), comes from the Latin root fascis, meaning ‘bundle of sticks, group, unity.’ How does knowing that fascism, at its core, is about strong group unity change the way we think about and resist it today? The word la colonia (colony) derives from the Latin verb colere, meaning ‘to cultivate and inhabit.’ How does thinking about colonization as the act of cultivating and inhabiting indigenous people’s land change the way we think and talk about a place like Puerto Rico?

Getting to dive deeper into our teaching practices and content exploration with Maple and the Semester 56 cohort has been an absolute joy, and I can’t wait to see how this year affects my work with apprentices moving forward.

“To me, the “language” in “The Language of Politics” refers to so much more than vocabulary. It’s about rhetoric, etymology, connotation, close reading, and unpacking word choice.



MAPLE

I’m having so much fun in school. So many days during this semester, I’ve marveled at the opportunity to return to HMI for a second apprenticeship semester. Pedagogically, it has been a gift to learn from such an experienced teacher as Amos who has believed in me, giving me responsibility and feedback in equal measure. Selfishly, it’s especially nice to get to work with someone who shares so many of my nerdy interests and passion projects. When Amos proposed that our new elective class be called ‘The Language of Politics,’ I just about jumped out of my chair. To me, the “language” in “The Language of Politics” refers to so much more than vocabulary. It’s about rhetoric, etymology, connotation, close reading, and unpacking word choice.

One of my favorite days of class this semester, we wrote two words — “¿QUÉ?” (what) and “¿CÓMO?” (how) — in huge letters on the whiteboard. We rehashed what we knew about the quasi-fascist dictatorship in Spain (1939 - 1975): the political control, censorship, prohibition of regional languages, and mass

disappearances. But then we asked: “Why was Franco popular during his lifetime, and why do some people think Spain would be better off today under Franco?” To answer, we analyzed Franco’s direct quotes, diving deep into rhetoric, puzzling over individual word choices, and building out a definition of fascism together.

This is the fundamental work of being a thoughtful citizen in a political world, and it’s been a gift to work with students to develop those skills and strengthen our understanding together. The classroom environment at HMI allows our class to do that joyfully and respectfully, as a true community that learns by challenging each other. Our students gained the confidence to tell each other explicitly, “I don’t agree,” and use that as a starting point for conversation.

My heart was happy after that class, as it so often is here. I am grateful to HMI for allowing me to spread my wings this year and trusting me with a wonderful group of students.



“WHILE 10 MILES MAY FEEL PEDESTRIAN TO THE MANY ENDURANCE RUNNERS WHO CALL LEADVILLE HOME, IT IS NO SMALL FEAT FOR MOST HMI STUDENTS.”

THE FUN RUN

10 miles AT 10,000 ft. AT 10 am

By Ray McGaughey, Director of Development



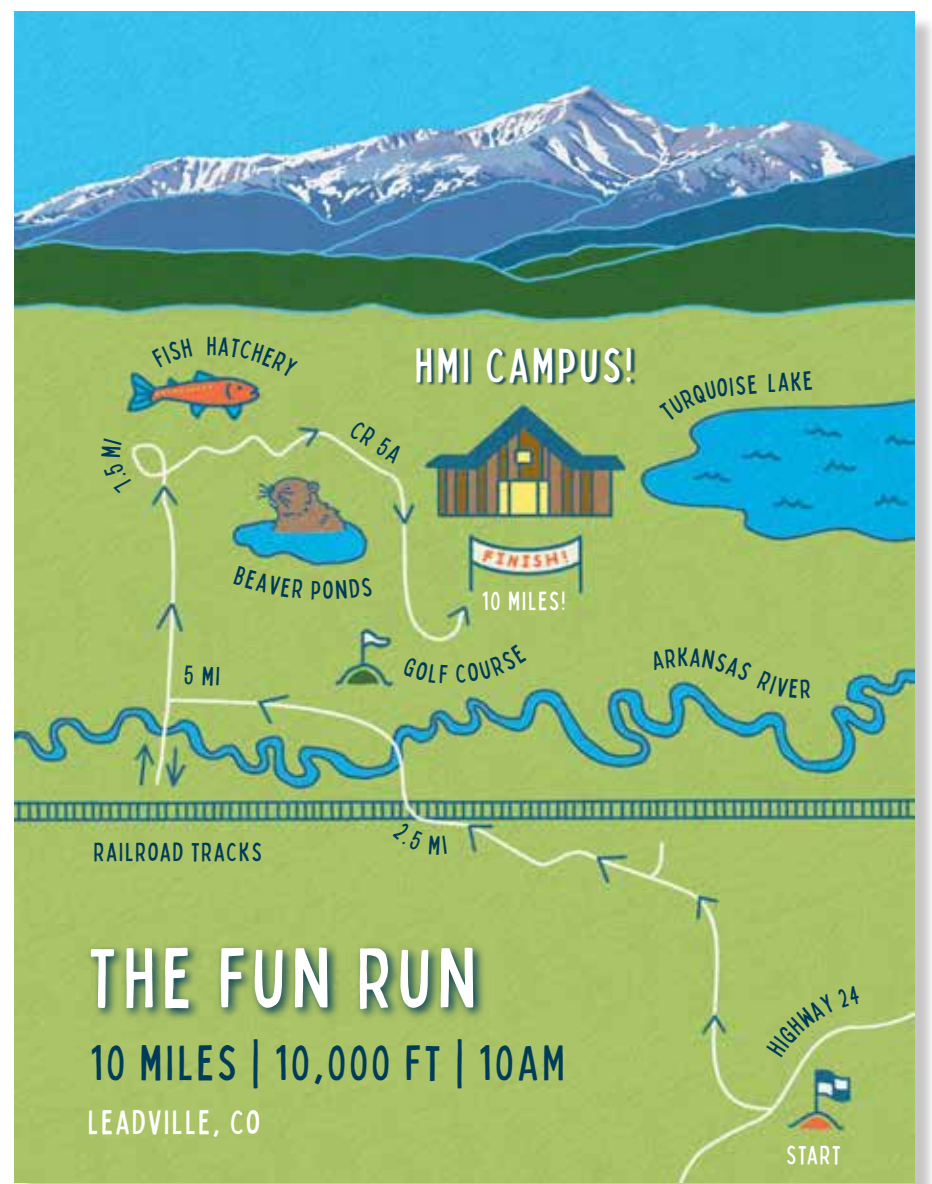
Danny O'Brien helped launch the Fun Run in 2005.

The faculty of RMS XIII (Fall 2004) had a problem. As the semester progressed, the students proved less and less motivated to wake up early and head out on their thrice-weekly morning runs. “It was clear that students needed something to aspire to—a goal to work towards” says then-history faculty Danny O’Brien. The following semester, Danny and Spanish faculty Ben Edmunds implemented what would go on to become one of the great HMI traditions: an end-of-semester race, cheekily named “the Fun Run.”

Students would train all semester, gradually increasing their mileage before attempting 10 miles at 10,000 ft. elevation at 10am. Every student would participate, walking parts of the course if necessary but ultimately finishing. The current course was finalized and the first official times were collected in RMS XV (Fall 2005).

In the two decades that followed, every semester cohort has trained for and ultimately run the Fun Run—more than 1,500 HMI students in all. “The Fun Run fits so well with HMI’s values,” reflects HMI co-founder Molly Barnes. “HMI aims to push students well past the limits of their experience, although not past the limits of their abilities. The Fun Run is another way for students to overcome their ‘I don’t think I can do that’ fears.”

continued on next page...



THE FUN RUN
 10 MILES | 10,000 FT | 10AM
 LEADVILLE, CO

“THE FUN RUN FITS SO WELL WITH HMI’S VALUES. HMI AIMS TO PUSH STUDENTS WELL PAST THE LIMITS OF THEIR EXPERIENCE, ALTHOUGH NOT PAST THE LIMITS OF THEIR ABILITIES.

—Molly Barnes, HMI Co-founder



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While 10 miles may feel pedestrian to the many endurance runners who call Leadville home, it is no small feat for most HMI students. For many, this run is their longest yet. Some students take the race very seriously, aiming for a personal best time—or even a new school record (currently held by Semester 38’s Simon Kearns: 1:04:14). Most participants, however, are just happy to finish.

This being HMI, the typical Fun Run involves many students and adults in ridiculous costumes, many of which are deeply impractical for running. Students in banana suits, tutus, and ski goggles run alongside faculty members and their dogs. There are dramatic

starting line speeches and cheering human tunnels at the finish line. A few lucky semesters lined up at the start only to be told they must take off one shoe, throw it down the road, and then hobble after it to begin the race. Year after year, the Fun Run remains one of the clearest expressions of what HMI does best: invite students to attempt something that feels impossible, and then watch them do it, surrounded by friends with a huge smile on their face.



MEMORABLE FUN RUN MOMENTS

One student ran the entire race in Crocs

(Semester 42)

One student ran in Birkenstocks and jeans

(Semester 40)

One student juggled for the entire race

(Semester 43)

Four students ran half the race while

blindfolded (Semester 26)

One student ran half the race while

balancing an egg on a spoon

(Semester 37)

One horse has participated in the Fun Run.

It got loose and chased a student until it was corralled by a fire truck (Semester 35)

Multiple students have run the entire race backwards, while dancing, or while tied to one another

Countless students have **added 3.1 miles** to reach the half marathon distance

At least two students have **added 16.2 miles** to reach the full marathon distance

(Semester 55)

Multiple students have run the entire race while **carrying an expedition backpack** loaded with **40+ lbs** of gear

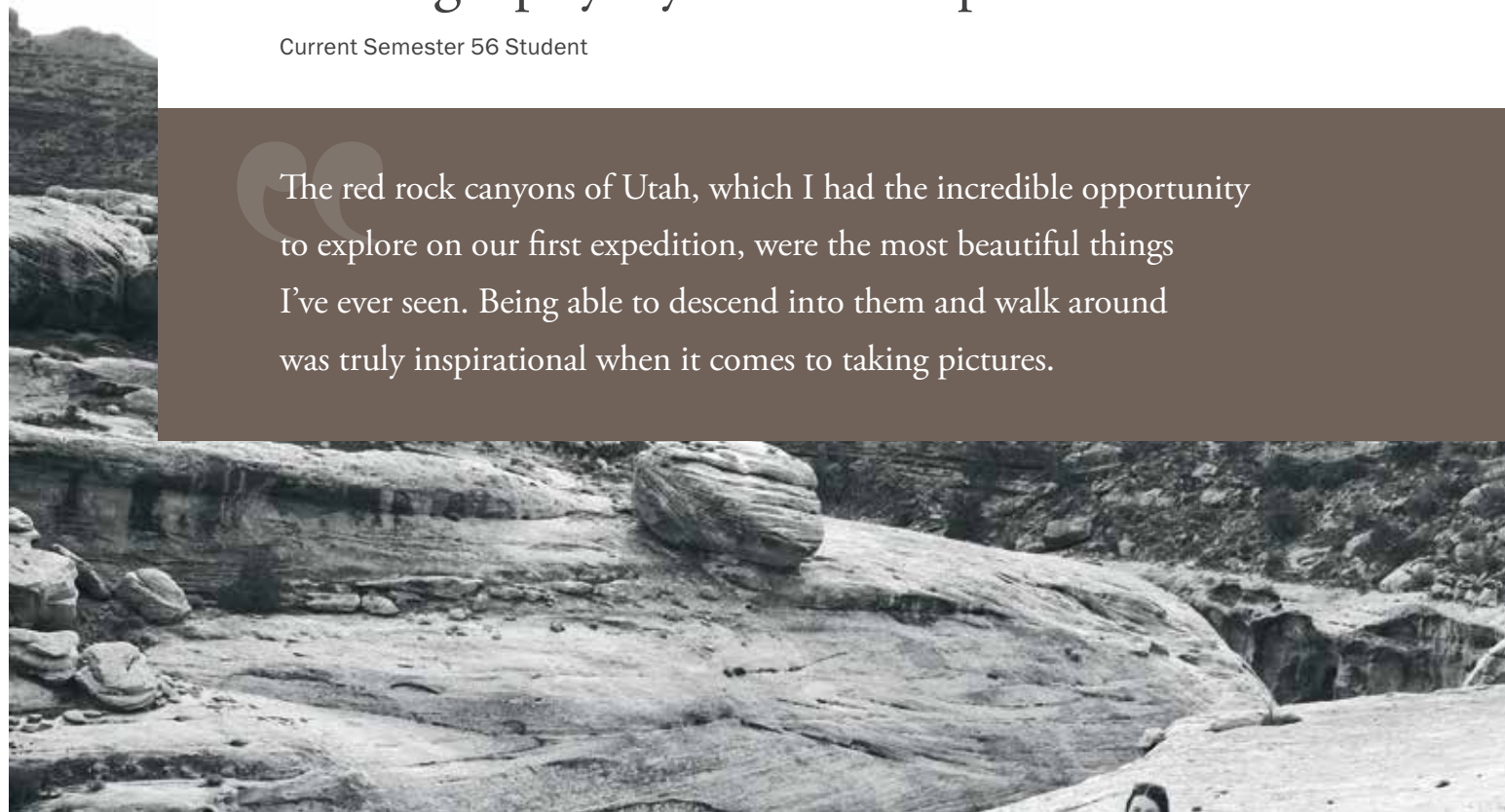
Many **wheeled objects** have been pushed / pulled for the entire race including:

- **A shopping cart** (Semester 16)
- **A stroller with two children** (Semester 34)
- **A cart with a dog in it** (Semester 36)
- **A cart with a student in it** (Semester 40)
- **A wheelchair with a student in it** (Semester 43)

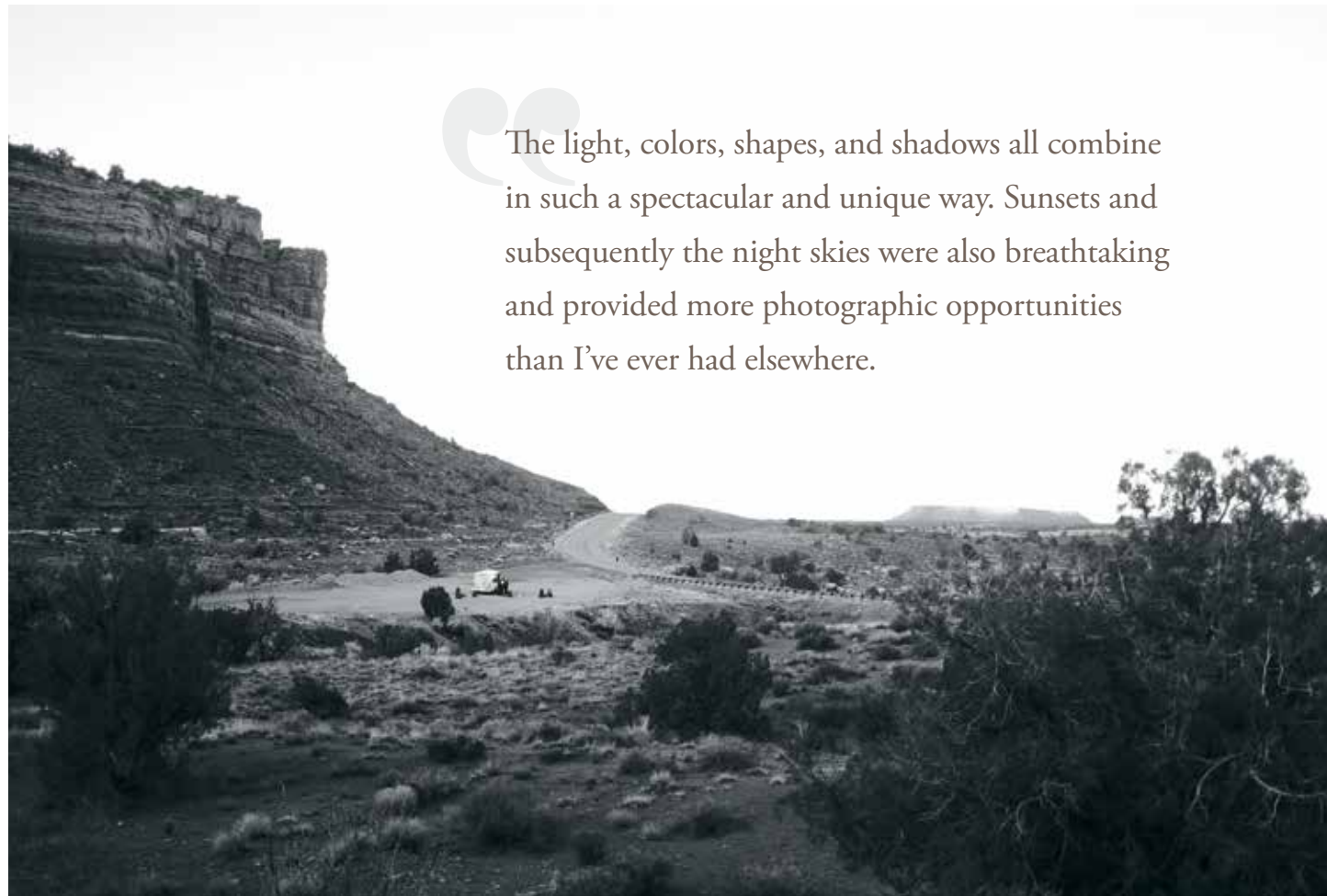
THE CANYONS IN BLACK & WHITE
Photography by Gable Napora

Current Semester 56 Student

The red rock canyons of Utah, which I had the incredible opportunity to explore on our first expedition, were the most beautiful things I've ever seen. Being able to descend into them and walk around was truly inspirational when it comes to taking pictures.



GABLE NAPORA



The light, colors, shapes, and shadows all combine in such a spectacular and unique way. Sunsets and subsequently the night skies were also breathtaking and provided more photographic opportunities than I've ever had elsewhere.





A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The HMI Educator's Expedition (EdEx) is a week-long summer professional development course for teachers and school administrators. Since 2017, this unique program has invited teachers to step out of their classrooms and into the role of students in the backcountry.



TATE CASTRO

We sat down with Tate Castro, Director of Academics and Faculty and 2025 EdEx instructor, to talk about what makes this program special.

Q: For those new to the concept, what is the core philosophy behind EdEx?

EdEx provides a special platform where educators can come together and study key components of HMI's leadership and communication curriculum while building connections with other teachers in the wilderness. It's pretty great! .

Q: It must be a shift for seasoned teachers to become "beginners" again. How do you handle that transition?

We start by naming the vulnerability. We acknowledge that it is okay for the experience to feel hard because it is new. This gives participants a direct insight into how their own students feel every day. Because the wilderness involves "doing life" together 24/7—like brushing your teeth in front of one another—professional walls come down quickly.



Q: Does the program focus more on hiking or on teaching theory?

It's a blend. While we teach high-level backcountry skills, we are always facilitating pedagogical reflections. For example, some participants arrive thinking a trip's success is measured by physical intensity. They often have an "aha" moment when they realize a three-mile hike can be full of meaning if it prioritizes building community and trust. We show that learning happens better when people trust their community, a lesson that translates directly back to a traditional classroom.

Q: Many schools are concerned about safety. How do you approach risk management with a group of adults?

We peel back the curtain. We share the tools we use to make decisions, such as likelihood and consequence grids, and even the nitty-gritty of pulling weather reports. We have honest conversations about navigating perceived vs. actual risk, and how to manage a group when individuals have different levels of risk aversion.

Work in education?

Join us in Leadville for our next Educator's Expedition course:
July 19 – 26, 2026.

LEARN MORE AT
hminet.org/edex



I am so much stronger than I thought I was. I can do hard things. And, time in nature away from everything else is so valuable. I knew these things, but this experience reminded me what I knew. I so look forward to helping my students have a similar experience!

— Amanda Benedict,
The Taft School Science Department Chair (2025 Participant)



As a public school teacher and coach, while I am not taking my students on expeditions, the personal and team goals that HMI sets in their curriculum translated beautifully to what I wish to instill in my students. More specifically, leadership styles, communication, and risk management. These three items can transition into the more traditional classroom. Hearing how HMI develops this in the course of a semester made me feel extra motivated to figure out how I can bring this into my curriculum. I think I spend too much time on brute math and not enough on the more important social and emotional skills.

— Biz Egan, Pascack Valley High School Math Faculty (2024 Participant)

HIGH MOUNTAIN INSTITUTE

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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.

UPCOMING TRIPS:

- ▶ **SAWATCH BACKPACKING** | Saturday, August 1 - Saturday, August 8, 2026
- ▶ **FALL FOLIAGE 14ERS** | Thursday, September 24 - Sunday, September 27, 2026
- ▶ **SKI JORING & TOURING** | Thursday, March 4 - Sunday, March 7, 2027

TO LEARN MORE, VISIT: hminet.org/alumni-trips

