



2023 ANNUAL REPORT



NATURE IS



FOR EVERYONE

FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Our goal for 2023 was not only to help even more youth experience the wilderness, but also provide them more vital support services. So last year we launched two new programs: Compass Project and North Star Project.

The youth we serve are often facing profound challenges that can take a tremendous mental toll on them. Unfortunately, even for families with private health insurance issues such as a lack of available providers, inadequate insurance coverage, and out-of-pocket costs are an obstacle to receiving needed care. Additionally nearly half of all psychiatrists will not accept private health insurance nor Medicaid.(1)

In order to help bridge this gap we launched North Star Project.

This program provides one-on-one mental health support with Vanessa, our licensed social worker. It creates a safe space for youth to share their feelings and speak about what is burdening them. They also embark on regular outdoor experiences together. They are able to be part of a tight-knit community where they can feel less lonely and more connected to others. Both factors that are crucial in overcoming mental health challenges. In monthly wellness surveys youth in the program report decreased anxiety and better coping skills, increasing their ability to overcome obstacles thrown their way. In one survey a youth wrote: **“Slowly but surely, therapy has helped me gain perspective. Vanessa has taught me so many valuable skills - how to breathe through panic attacks, how to reframe negative thoughts, and how to set boundaries with others. It’s amazing how much of a difference it’s made.”**

Over my nearly 20 years working with youth I have seen far too many successful high school students



struggle with the transition from high school to college. Many of them found the college application process and college itself overwhelming. Often this derailed their college career and early stages of adulthood.

In an effort to help youth stay on their path we launched Compass Project. Compass Project provides one-on-one academic support with our academic counselor. Youth have the opportunity to work on S.M.A.R.T. goals, improve time management skills, receive assistance with their college applications, process the school-college transition, and receive support in a wide variety of academic concerns. Blended into the program are confidence-building outdoor adventures. The program supports youth with implementing and maintaining the skills, confidence and motivation gained from outdoor excursions into their academic life.

With the addition of these two programs Team Wilderness has

become a full service agency that can support youth in a myriad of ways as they grow into adulthood. All of this work culminated in Team Wilderness receiving a Governor’s Award in December. The Environmental Excellence Award was in the category of Building Healthy Communities. I could not be more proud of the staff for the recognition of their hard work.

Thank you, as none of this would be possible without your support. We look forward to even more growth in 2024.

Handwritten signature of Steve Cunningham

Steve Cunningham
Founder & Executive Director

(1) Bishop TF, Press MJ, Keyhani S, Pincus HA. Acceptance of insurance by psychiatrists and the implications for access to mental health care. *JAMA Psychiatry*. 2014;71(2):176-181. doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2013.2862. Accessed July 6, 2022.

FROM OUR BOARD PRESIDENT

As we reflect on another impactful year at Team Wilderness, I am filled with gratitude for the journey we've shared and the progress we've made together. Since our founding in 2016, Team Wilderness has been dedicated to bridging the Nature Gap and providing equitable access to the outdoors for urban youth in Hudson County.

One of the key pillars of our success has been the growth and professionalization of our Board of Directors. Over the years, we have worked tirelessly to cultivate a dynamic and forward-thinking board that is deeply committed to our mission and vision and the individual who brought this to life, our Executive Director Steve Cunningham. Through strategic recruitment efforts and ongoing training and development, we have built a team of leaders who bring diverse perspectives, expertise, and passion to the table.

As Board President, I have had the privilege of leading this remarkable group of individuals and helping to shape the direction of our organization with our fearless leader Steve and his dedicated staff. Together, we have focused on building a solid foundation for growth, sustainability, and impact. From refining our strategic plans to strengthening our governance practices, we have

worked diligently to ensure that Team Wilderness is well-positioned to serve more young people, evolve our programming, and expand our reach in the years to come.

Just recently, we celebrated a significant milestone with the opening of our new home, Base Camp. Located in the heart of Jersey City, Base Camp serves as a central hub for our operations, providing a dedicated space for our programs and activities. I hope you will take an opportunity to attend a future Photography Club Gallery Event this year. Every time that I attend, I am inspired by the talent and creativity of our young artists, and I am proud of the opportunities we provide for artistic expression and outdoor exploration. Looking ahead, I am excited for the future of Team Wilderness and all those who we serve. With your continued support, we will continue to grow, innovate, and make a lasting difference in the lives of urban youth.

On behalf of the entire Team Wilderness family, I want to express my deepest gratitude for your belief in



our mission and your commitment to our cause. Together, we are building a brighter future for our youth and our planet. Thank you for being a part of our journey.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized initials and a surname.

Joel Torres, MA, MCHES
Board President



STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Dakota

Less than a year ago I had never been on a hike in my life. I not only hadn't been on a hike, I never even had an interest in hiking. If you asked me then I would have told you that's too much and it's not for me.

Then I joined the Photo Club. Being in nature with the Photography Club was kind of amazing. It's cool learning how to take awesome photos. But that's just one part of the club. I got to pick my best pictures and try to sell them in a gallery. I love those galleries. I can show off my work and it forces me to be more social. I can communicate with buyers and be a bit of a sales person. It feels really good to sell something you created.

Then I joined Summer Treks. That's their two week program in the summer. Everything about it was both amazing and hard. Those hikes were not for the weak. There was lots of climbing and it seemed like rocks were everywhere. It felt like I was

stepping on pointy bricks for days. But it was somehow fun. Being able to do it feels good. I was proud of myself.

Then came the three day trip in the Catskills. This was not like Jersey City. There's no trash. There's no broken sidewalks. But, there's also no bathrooms! We had to use the bathroom in the woods. Who does that? We also had to cook the food in filtered water so we could eat it. Sleeping in a tent. LET. ME. TELL. YOU. That first night it was tough to sleep. I kept hearing things. Everything sounded like a venomous snake. It was not for the weak. And all of this was mostly with new people that I didn't know at all. It was an experience to bond with them. We became close.

One challenging thing we did was rappelling. It felt like a thriller movie. It was terrifying to be backing down a cliff. I would have never



expected me to ever do something like that. I am a normal person. I am a city girl. We do not rappel! It was challenging and I was afraid. But after gaining confidence from the staff I knew I could do it. And I did!

After our scary rappelling journey, we went to see this beautiful waterfall. The waterfall had a dope rainbow which was absolutely breathtaking.

Summer Treks gave me more confidence and prepared me for living in the outside world, and taking care of myself. Now thanks to everyone I am a hiker.

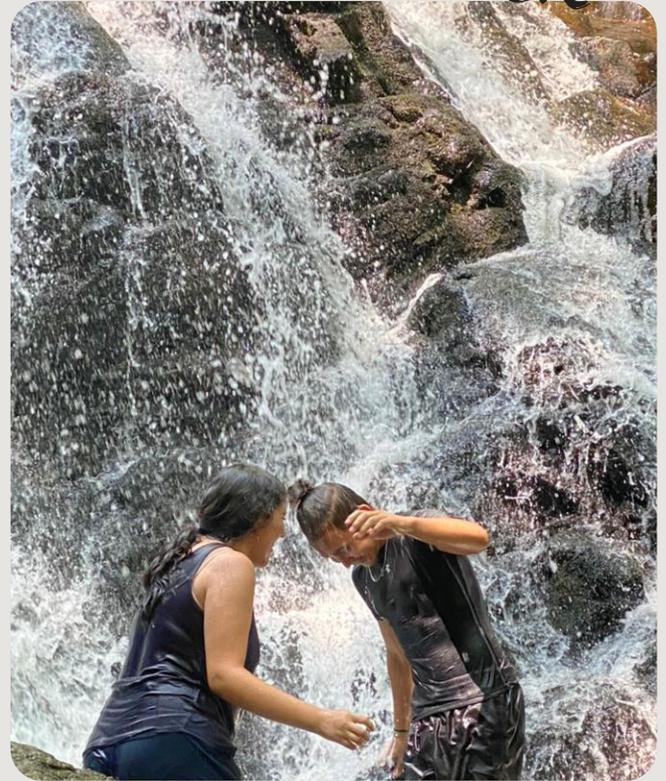


"I don't get to experience nature outside of Team Wilderness. I'm mostly just in my room all day. I like how you get your workout in while enjoying nature." -Jeffrey

SPRING



SUMMER



Year-Round Outdoor Adventures

FALL



WINTER



PROGRAMS

Compass Project

Participants receive free virtual academic coaching from 8th grade through their first two years of college. Our dedicated coaches offer personalized support, helping students navigate their academic challenges and reach their full potential. Regular outdoor trips allow participants to connect with their peers and tackle various challenges on the trail. These adventures are not just about physical activity; they are designed to build teamwork, resilience, and leadership skills.

North Star Project

This program supports the mental health and well-being of youth through comprehensive counseling services. Our licensed social worker provides one-on-one in person counseling sessions ensuring that each participant receives the personalized care and attention they need. These sessions are designed to help youth

navigate life's challenges, build coping strategies, and improve their overall mental health. In addition to counseling, North Star Project offers monthly hiking trips focused on mindfulness. These trips provide participants with the opportunity to connect with nature, practice mindfulness techniques, and find peace in the outdoors.

Photography Club

An after school club that infuses the arts with the wilderness. It includes weekly after-school lessons in photography and monthly trips to discover and capture the wilderness. Additionally, youth have the opportunity to display and sell their prints in a gallery at the end of each trimester.

Summer Treks

Our inaugural program provides outdoor character building adventures

during the summer break. Trips include hiking, a yoga hike, and rappelling. Breakfast and lunch is provided for all youth. Every activity and trip incorporates our E.T.H.I.C.A.L. values (empathy, teamwork, health, inclusivity, community, conquering adversity, and leadership). The session culminates with a three day backpacking trip in the Catskill mountains. Youth unplug and bond while working together to build the campsite.

Wilderness Club

Offers weekly team building, tutoring, mentoring and lessons in nature photography. This is coupled with monthly adventures in the wilderness. Wilderness Club is managed with support by college students that are alumni of Summer Treks. High school students that are alumni of Summer Treks provided secondary support tutoring.

How Participants Identified

Ethnicity:

Hispanic/Latino: 49%

Race:

African American: 37%

Multiracial: 25%

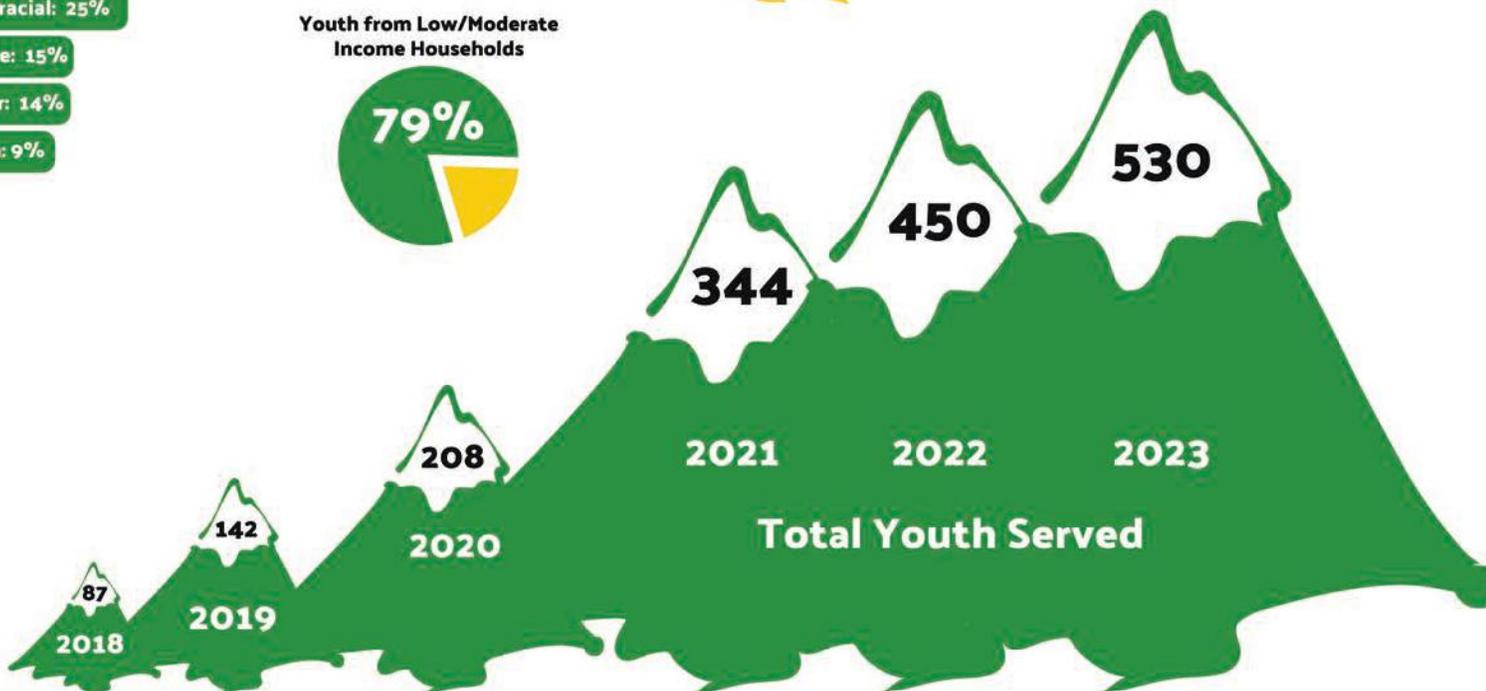
White: 15%

Other: 14%

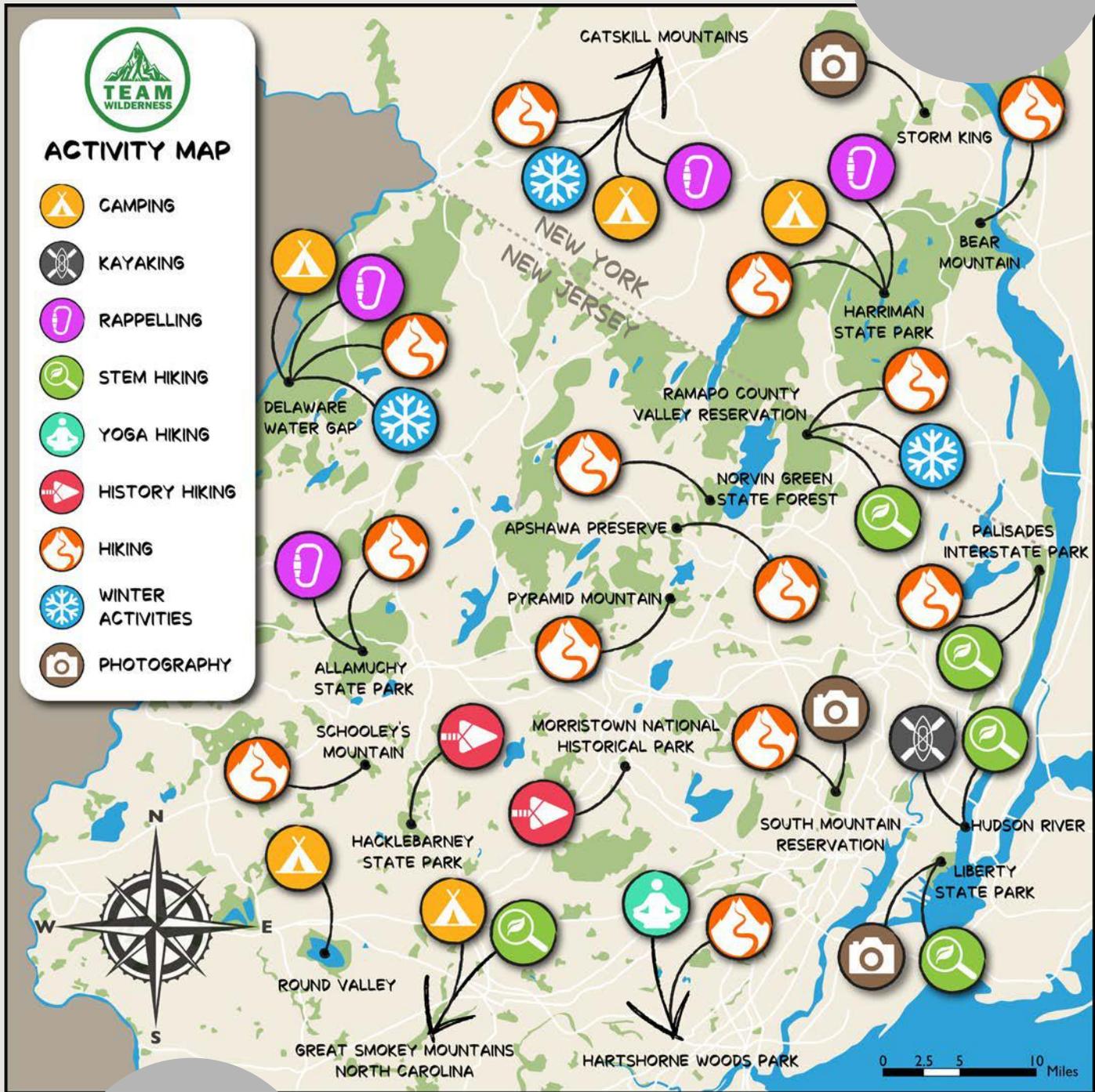
Asian: 9%



Youth from Low/Moderate Income Households



94% of participants reported increased confidence



83% reported being in nature helped reduce their stress

"Team Wilderness makes you feel very welcomed throughout every hike and adventure. I have definitely grown closer to nature. I love the trees, fresh air and meeting new people." -Emily

OUR TEAM



From left to Right: Top Row: Aracelis Hannah, Arthur Velwest, Shane Strano, Wendy De Armas Dominguez, Vanessa Reina, Ke Tenn, and Steve Cunningham. *Bottom Row:* Christian Barbosa, Milo Sanchez, Steph Silva, Kiara Jorge, Sara Adamu, and Gelmaris Rijaard. *Not Pictured:* Alexander Diaz, Colette Adrien, Hamis Guirgis, Javier Paz, Melodee Sampson, and Yawa.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS



From left to Right: Trustee: Lauren Tortorete, Senior Vice-President, Powell Communications -- Executive Director: Steve Cunningham, Team Wilderness -- Trustee: Stephanie Yosco-Dwyer, Director Of Strategic Partnerships, Students 2 Science Inc. -- President: Joel Torres, Program Coordinator, Essex County Division of Community Health Services -- Trustee: Lilia R. Diaz, Associate Program Support Manager, PSEG -- Trustee: Pamela Johnson Founder & Executive Director, Anti-violence Coalition of Hudson County Vice-President: Juan Melli, Managing Director, Mercury Public Affairs. *Not Pictured:* Secretary: Brenda Kessler, Program Manager, Children & Nature Network -- Treasurer: Emily Feldman, Owner, Emily's Bookkeeping -- Trustee: Brigid D'Souza, Assistant Professor & CPA Advisor, Saint Peter's University -- Trustee: Elvi Guzman, President City Challenge Athletics Foundation -- Trustee: Helen Corona, K-12 Education Ambassador, T-Mobile -- Trustee: Rasheed Chambers Sr, Founder, NJ Web Studios. -- Trustee: Shince Francis, Partner, PwC.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Steph Silva, Programming Director

In 2023, Steph Silva joined Team Wilderness as our new Programming Director. She brings to the role extensive field experience, as well as a personal connection to Jersey City.

“The synergy was crazy because at the same time this position opened up, I was at a point in my life thinking, what is next for me? If I could have created a non-profit in Jersey City myself, it would be Team Wilderness,” Steph says.

Prior to Team Wilderness, Steph had been working with urban youth in Washington DC. “They were kids who had never experienced nature. They had grown up in DC, and we would take them to places in rural Virginia for a three day camp. They would be exposed to so many new things,” Steph explains.

In that role, Steph witnessed the transformative effect nature could have on inner city youth. “On the first day, they would say, oh this is terrible, I hate this,” Steph recalls. “It was all new to them. The second night, they would continue, ‘This is even worse than I thought. Now I’ve spent the night here and I feel worse!’ But then on the third day, something incredible would happen. By the time we left, they would be saying, ‘I think I want to come back here.’ I even had some kids tell me they would like to have my job one day! I could see the impact the experience had on them. It was a clear success.”

Steph understands firsthand the outside impact nature can have on youth. Growing up in Jersey City, she had little exposure to the outdoors in her early childhood. When her family later moved to Hoboken, she would often visit the public parks there. Eventually, Steph went on to study Marine Biology at Rut-

gers University. In pursuing her degree and gaining valuable work experience, she observed differences between her own life path, and the experiences of her college peers, and later, her coworkers.

“It was still a different time then, in terms of awareness. People would poke fun of me. I was the girl from Jersey City, and a lot was new to me. I’d see a Blue Jay, and it would be amazing to me. Yet the people around me would comment, oh that’s a very common backyard bird. They would act like, oh isn’t that cute, the city girl hasn’t seen that before. They weren’t aware of the differences, they couldn’t relate. The way they reacted sometimes made me feel like an outsider. I didn’t have the confidence to say then, yeah, this is something new for me, I haven’t experienced this before.”

As Steph’s career progressed in youth development and environmental education, she became more determined to align the knowledge and training she had gained with a mission that supported marginalized communities.

“As I worked more with kids, I saw the differences in how affluent kids, who grew up with abundant exposure to the outdoors, reacted to nature compared to urban youth, who didn’t have those same resources and experiences. I saw myself in some of them. They were experiencing what it was like to be out of their element too.”

For that reason, returning to work in Jersey City felt like a full circle moment for Steph. “While I was

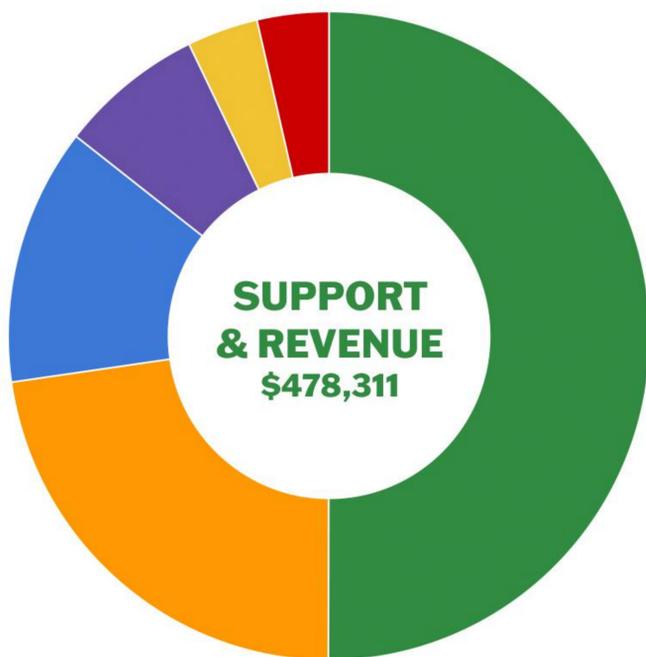


out in the woods, learning all these lessons from working with young people outdoors, [Team Wilderness Founder] Steve was here in Jersey City creating this amazing organization. Working here now gives me the opportunity to bring all that I learned about childhood development, outdoor education, social emotional learning and more back to my hometown,” Steph says.

Steph was required to jump right into her new role, as 2023 saw the launch of two brand new programs, Compass and North Star Project (see pg 6 to learn more about all our programs). Steph views these additions to programming as just the beginning of an ongoing effort to add extra layers of support for youth. Her invaluable insight into the needs of local youth, and her passion for nature and youth education, remain at the core of all her initiatives.

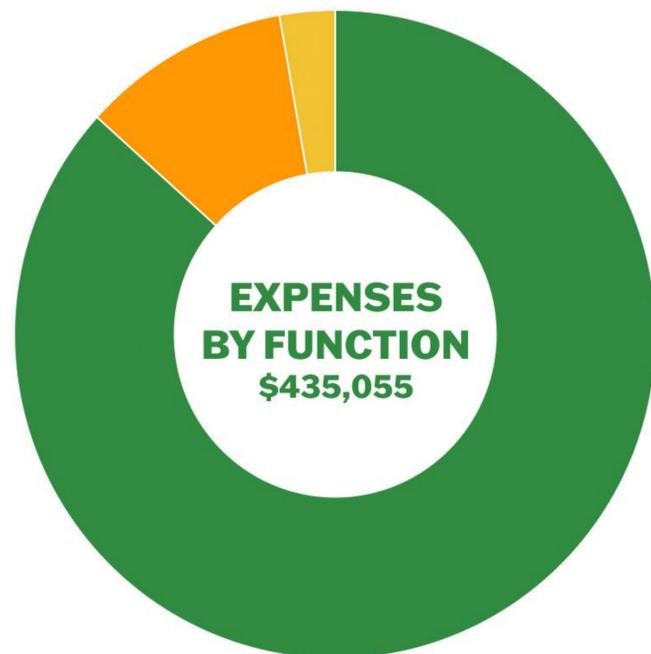
“There are so many moments that remind me why this is what I was meant to do,” Steph says. “Watching students go from being afraid to sit in the grass to catching their first frog, or wading through the water in a lake to collect a water sample—that is so rewarding to me.”

FINANCIALS



- **GRANTS** \$239,328
- **PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS** \$108,505
- **INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT** \$61,356
- **CORPORATE SUPPORT** \$34,733
- **EVENTS** \$17,114
- **TUITION** \$17,275

- **PROGRAMMING** \$377,122
- **FUNDRAISING** \$45,793
- **OPERATING** \$12,140



These numbers have been confirmed via an independent audit.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Aracelis Hannah

As an alumni and current junior field instructor with the organization, I have learned so much.

I grew up in a public housing complex in Jersey City. So, I didn't have access to gorgeous vistas, scenic waterfalls, or even the calming experiences that nature provides.

I always wanted to be a scientist, but didn't ever consider Earth and Environmental Science as a major in college until I was introduced to it at Team Wilderness.

That has channeled into my current

aspiration to work for the National Park Service. Last summer, I interned with the Student Conservation Association in partnership with the National Park Service in Alaska. This summer I'm working in Oregon giving cave tours for visitors making their way up to see Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve.

I will always be grateful for the opportunities that opened up to me when I joined Team Wilderness eight years ago!





Above: In December 2023, Team Wilderness received a Governor’s Environmental Excellence Award in the category of Building Healthy Communities. *Pictured:* Juan Melli, Board Vice President -- Steve Cunningham, Founder & Executive Director -- Shawn M. LaTourette, Commissioner, NJ Department of Environmental Protection -- Steph Silva, Programming Director -- Hamis Guirgis, Development Director

PARTNERS

By partnering with local schools and organizations serving students, as well as local businesses, Team Wilderness harnesses the power of local leadership and community to offer unique opportunities for mentorship, personal growth and shared experiences outdoors.

In 2023, Team Wilderness partnered with companies like Goldman Sachs, SILVERMAN, and the national youth mentoring non-profit Summer Search.

Senior Summer Search Program Manager Tashiana Diaz shared: “Team Wilderness really works with our students to make the experience accessible and digestible. This is important because these experiences are completely new for them.

One way that helps it feel more accessible is having leaders who look like our students. That is something we don’t see in our partners very often, if at all.

Our students are primarily students of color. They are representative of all different identities including gender, orientation, and their background.

Team Wilderness instructors represent our students in all of those ways and it impacted our students because they saw themselves in the instructors. They felt a level of trust and understanding. The instructors could relate to them in a deeper way. That is really important to us.”



SUPPORTERS

We are grateful to everyone who donated to Team Wilderness in 2023. Thank you for making a difference in the lives of New Jersey youth.

ORGANIZATIONS



FRIENDS

Anonymous
 Adam & Anna Vella
 Aida & Patrick McGuinness
 Alexander Tong
 Alyssa Ki
 Amy & Doug Cunningham
 Andrea Foord
 Andrew Cunningham
 Ann Leddy
 Anne Blaney
 Anthony Romano
 Becky Lee
 Bonnie & Rich Brodman

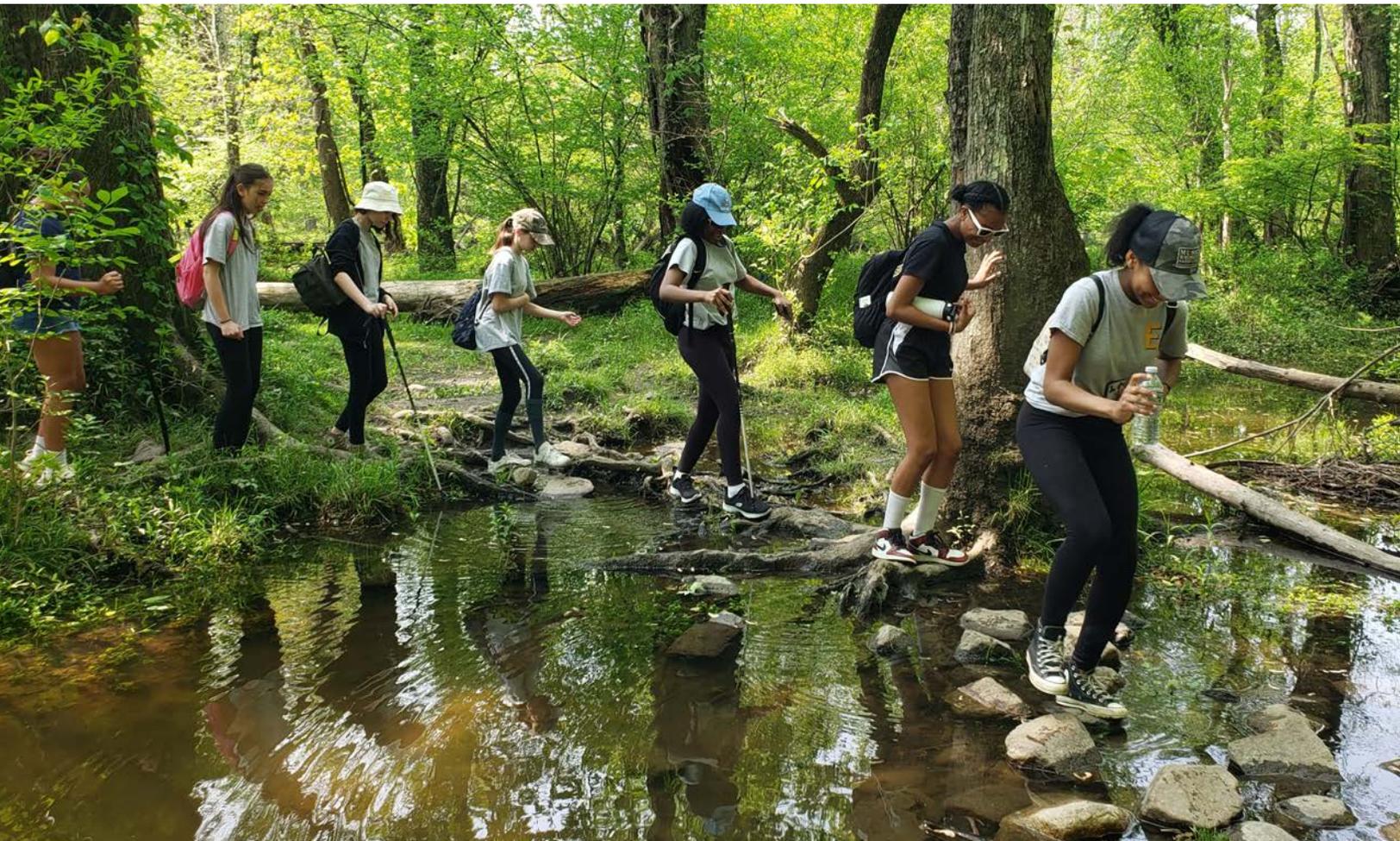
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