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NEXT GENERATION

We live in a time of “Look at me, look at me,” presented to us on a daily basis whenever we have any contact with social media. I am witness to countless situations where people feign interest in news and conversations so that they can turn it around and make it all about themselves.

It’s so refreshing, then, to be able to say, “Look at them,” which is why I am writing about Katie McDonnell, age 19, and Taylor Rabbitt, 22. Although these ladies have never met, they share an exuberance, discipline, and passion to learn about our

oceans, mountains, and diverse cultures through adventure, education, and exploration. They both have a great attitude towards life.



Katie McDonnell is a freshman at Elon University and a National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) graduate. I have known Katie since she was born and recognize that she has a natural curiosity, quick mind, and love of the outdoors and nature. She was raised by her mother, who encouraged her to try new things and be independent.

Katie opted to take a gap year and attended NOLS where she learned invaluable outdoor and life skills. She can start a fire in the snow and is unfazed by sleeping outdoors in the elements for weeks on end! She was one of few girls in the program and they bonded closely by the end of the months spent traveling and learning together.

I recently spoke with Katie about her experiences while at NOLS and what helped her to build confidence in the field: “During my time at NOLS, there was a week where I was the only girl in group of 8. It was part of the ISGE (Independent Student Group Expedition) and I was a little nervous, but at the end of it I earned a lot of respect from the guys I was traveling with. I worked very hard alongside them and they saw me as an equal, and that was a great feeling!”

I asked Katie how she feels about women as role models for other women and her reply was “there is something special about feeling empowered by a person who has achieved the things you are attempting under similar circumstances.”

She thinks that “in the adventure world, being a woman often puts you back a step in the process of recognition for your achievements and because of that I think that women make the best role models for other women.”

Katie is close to her family and good friends whom she relies on for support and strength. She is forging her own path in her own way and believes that all her travel experiences and education will build her confidence and independence.

Katie spent two months last spring trekking with a fellow NOLS graduate on the Pacific Crest Trail. I asked her what her next dream adventure opportunity would be.



She enthusiastically replied: “I would love to be on expedition in New Zealand to learn about the Maori culture and to try something new that I have not done yet.”



Taylor Rabbitt is a very seasoned ocean adventurer who I have known for seven years.

We met on a Young Explorers Expedition, which took us through the Bahamas scuba diving with sharks and wild dolphins. Taylor was fearless, as one may expect from a child who grew up near the ocean in South Florida.

She was fortunate enough to have an uncle who owned a research vessel and took her along on various expeditions, while encouraging her

to develop her technical underwater and naturalist skills. She is lover of all animal life, especially underwater creatures.

I spoke with Taylor about her travels through Hawaii, rebreather diving, and her three month adventure through Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Taylor gives a very strong shout-out to her mentor, “Uncle Tim Taylor,” but adds that having women as role models is something she feels is very important. She gets “inspiration from family and friends.” Taylor says, “I remember wanting to travel and explore from the third grade; I was inspired by my teacher, Mrs. Hawthorne, who traveled the world and had amazing stories to share, she was all about travel, travel, travel.”

She adds that “hearing other people’s travel stories drives me to want to explore and expand my horizons, and, who knows, maybe some of my adventures and work will inspire others to travel and explore our world as well.”

Taylor loved the people of Costa Rica and Nicaragua and the beautiful waters of each country. She found that the locals were surprised to see her skimboarding, as they had not seen a girl doing this on her own. They would gather to watch her head out on the waves, which she found amusing.

Her hope is “to be a role model to a younger generation of women and help empower them through my experiences.”

Taylor has worked as an intern on National Geographic Critter Cam expeditions in the Dry Tortugas and scuba diving expeditions in the Florida Keys and Bahamas. She has guided scuba diving expeditions in Hawaii, and is one of the youngest female rebreather divers around.



Taylor is currently sailing a boat through the Bahamas to the Virgin Islands earning her captain’s license. Her dream adventure opportunity? “To scuba dive in either the Philippines or the Maldives; it would be amazing to see the marine life in these parts of the world.”

I am very impressed and proud of the young women who are out traveling and exploring our world and hoping to make a difference along the way. They are educating themselves through different cultures, disciplines, oceans, and people.

It's not about being Space Chick, Mountains, Oceans, or Shark Chick; its about sharing interests, passions, and passing the torch to the next generation or even to the woman alongside you. Women need to support each other, and it is my hope that talented and inspirational women be generous with their time, experience, and knowledge as often as possible.

Independence and self-confidence are beautiful at any age, so pack away your wrinkle cream and put on your traveling boots! Until our next adventure...

