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D.C. gang members escape the hood in the West Virginia wilderness

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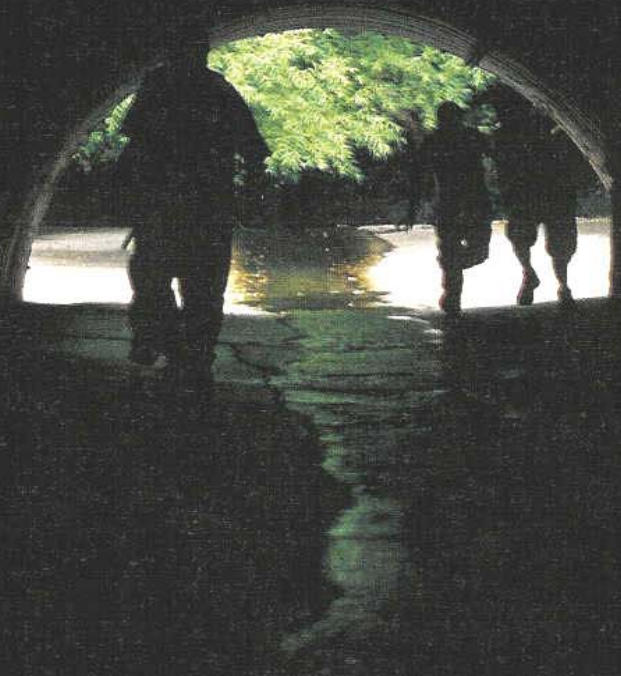
THE GANG



BIG CITY MOUNTAINEERS TAKES YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN FROM THE CLUTCHES OF INNER CITY LIFE—GANGS, DRUGS AND VIOLENCE—AND PLANTS THEM IN THE WILDERNESS. WILL THE SEEDS GROW? BY **MARCUS WOOLF** PHOTOS BY **ABRAHM LUSTGARTEN**

Rafael stands in the darkness of a drainage pipe that runs beneath a street in Gaithersburg, Maryland. The humid air of August hangs dead in the tunnel, and stale water pools around his shoes.

"Bad things happen in here," Rafael tells me, his voice echoing through the corrugated cave. A minute earlier, he pointed out red and blue scrolls of spray paint at the lip of the tunnel—signs of Latino gangs that roam the streets above.

"What happens in here?" I ask.

"The gangs bring people here. They bring them here to beat them up." ▶

THE GANG

A 16-year-old immigrant from El Salvador, Rafael has been involved with the Salvadoran gang MS-13 since he moved to the US four years ago. Solid and lean like a young prize-fighter, he appears honed to withstand the punishing blows of gang battles. His white tank top stretches across a broad back the color of bronze, and barbells have formed hills on his shoulders and biceps. But there's no meanness in his face, where round cheeks and still, brown eyes soften a polite and restful face.

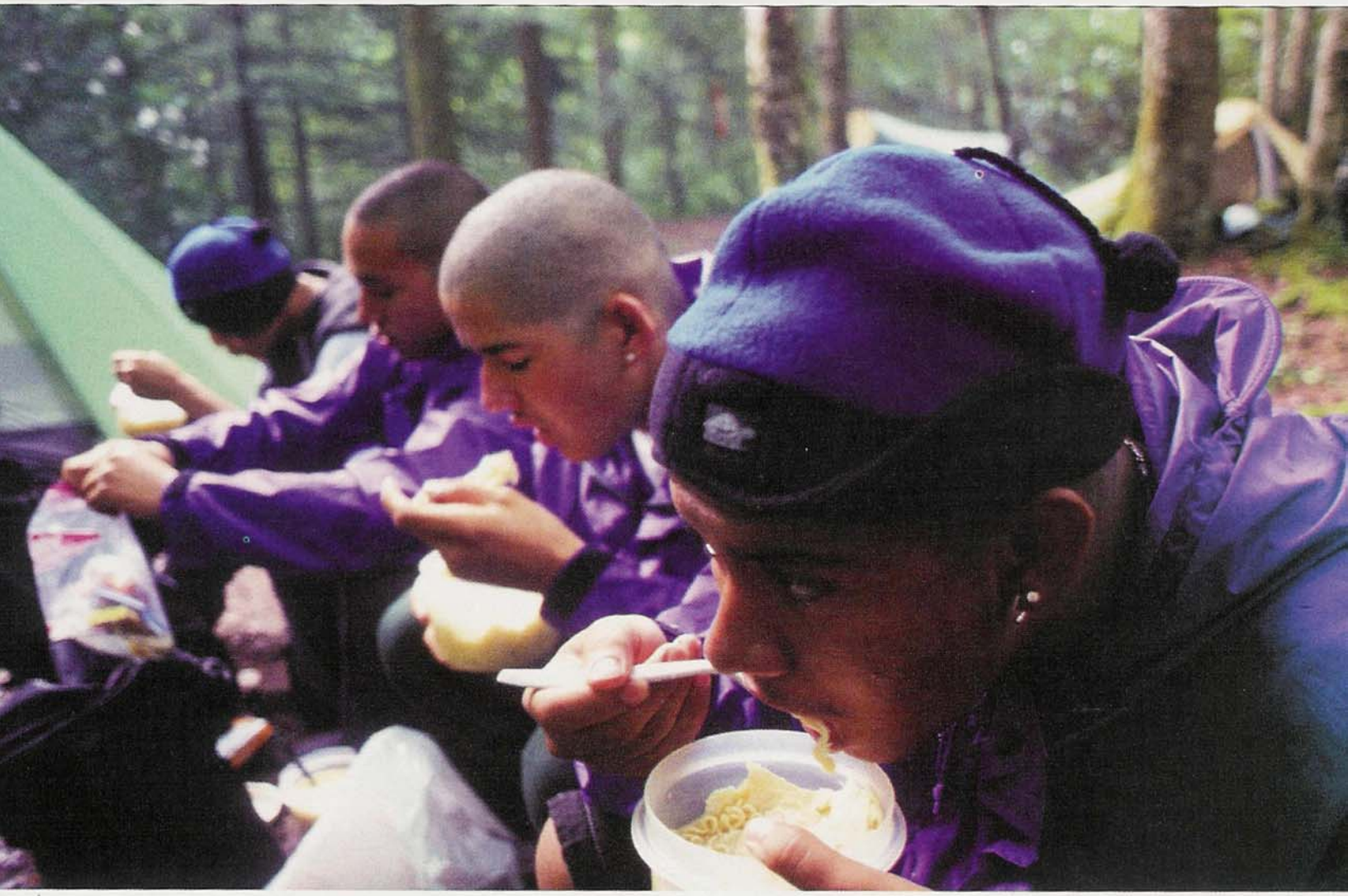
This hollow tunnel lies in stark contrast to the lush Monongahela forest Rafael will hike in the days ahead. He and four other Latino teenagers from the Washington, D.C., area will join a backpacking trip hosted by Big City Mountaineers (BCM).

Founded in Florida 14 years ago, and currently headquartered in Golden, Colorado, BCM runs week-long outings to show inner-city youth a different reality. The program works on the principle that nature offers kids such a profoundly different environment that it evokes real emotional changes. Rafael and the others have never walked in wilderness. Perhaps, once they are physically separated from urban trappings, their minds will be free to roam—free to discover a more positive notion of the world. But I wonder whether it will work.

For most Latinos—especially immigrants—the notion of walking into the wilderness is far-fetched. This simply is not a part of their culture. Also, bringing the boys to the forest could be like tugging on an elastic band. We can try to expand their world, but once they return home, will it snap back? Having noticed a steady demand for outdoor education programs over the past few years, I hope to gain some sense of their real impact.

I've asked Rafael and the other boys to show me their neighborhood before we depart for West Virginia. I want to measure for myself the gulf that separates the boys' everyday reality and the one we're about to show them.

They live among a swelling population of immigrants who began to move to the suburb of Gaithersburg 20 years ago to escape the poverty and violence of Central



■ ***Opposite:*** *Josue, Amilcar, Juan, Adolfo and Raphael (left to right)*

Above: *Rafael, Amilcar, Josue and Juan (closest to farthest) refuel on their second favorite camp food—Ramen. Tortillas are their first love.*

and South America. But crime, drugs and gang violence have tightened their grip on the area. Though Gaithersburg lies in one of Maryland's wealthiest counties, immigrants here are trapped in its poor pockets, walled in by low-paying jobs, and cultural and language barriers.

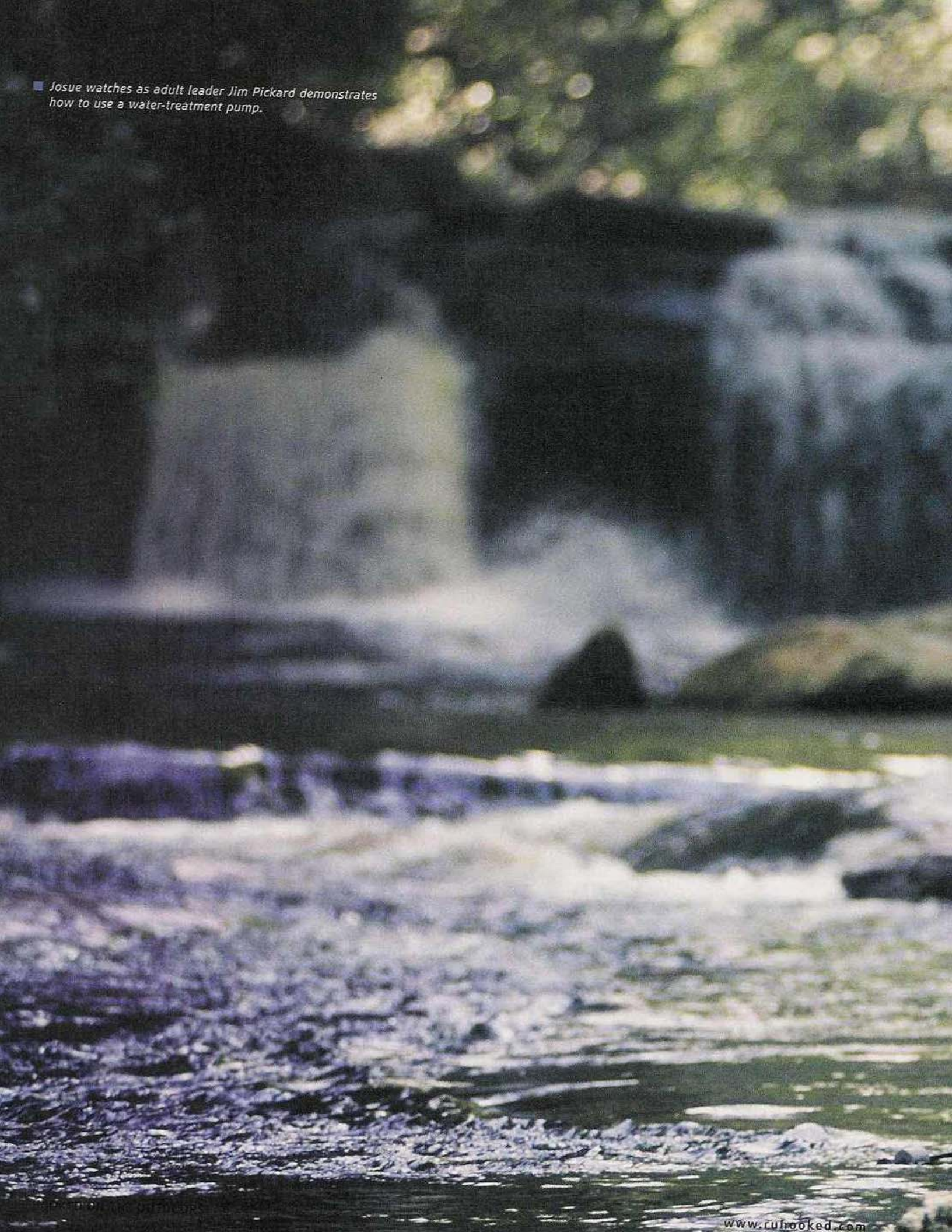
Rafael leads us out of the tunnel to the apartment building where he lives with his mother. The door opens into a small living room with stained brown carpet (Rafael apologizes and explains they had a party), plus a well-worn couch and Rafael's weight bench. Hung slightly crooked on a plain wall is a picture of Jesus and a collage of Rafael's school certificates. Adjoining this is a drab kitchen and a dark hallway of locked bedrooms. Rafael mentions that he shares a bedroom with an uncle, but he doesn't have a key to open that door. Gazing around the cramped tenement, I understand why Rafael and his friends prefer to spend their time on the street.

A few minutes' drive form the apartment is the broad green lawn that stretches beside Gaithersburg High School. Rafael plays soccer here with the others in the BCM group: Amilcar, Adolfo, Juan and Josue. As we stroll across the field under the bright summer sun, I ask what they do when they're not playing soccer. Adolfo says they usually spend time at the Identity youth center—a 45-minute train ride away.

Diego Uriburu and Candace Kattar launched Identity, a non-profit organization, four years ago, realizing that Washington, D.C., and Maryland provide few social services for young Latinos. "This community is unique," Diego says. "In the D.C. metro area, many people who emigrated to the US were peasants, and they are very poor and illiterate. Many of the kids don't have a network or support system that helps them transition to becoming young adults."

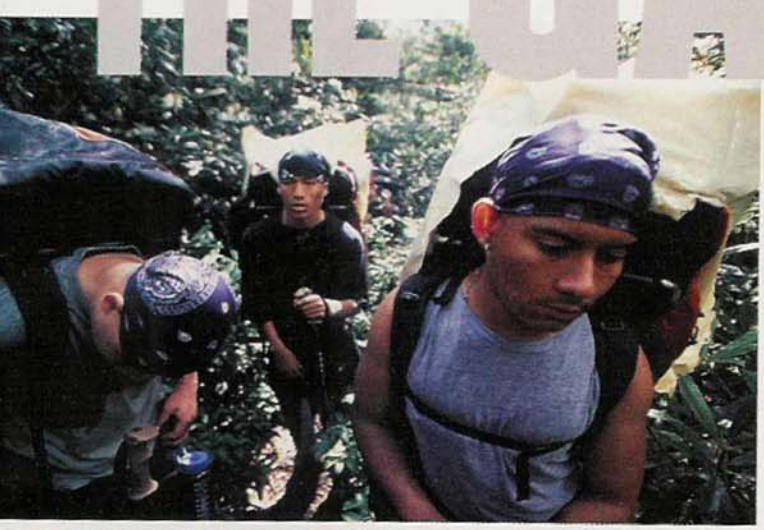
The day before we're to leave for the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia, I hang around the Identity building for a while, and quickly see why the kids treat it as a second home. When the kids walk in, Candace greets them with a smile and a hug, and laughter fills the hallway. Identity not only provides Latino kids a surrogate family, it also serves as a sanctuary from destructive environments. Diego and Candace hope the wilderness might offer something similar.

Identity has invested about $2,000 to participate in the BCM outing, which links youth centers such as Identity with local volunteers, who lead the wilderness outings. BCM trains volunteers, provides gear donated by manufacturers and helps its partners raise funds to defray costs. ▶



Josue watches as adult leader Jim Pickard demonstrates how to use a water-treatment pump.

THE GANG



■ ***Top:*** *Adolfo, Juan and Rafael rest in a rhododendron thicket after hiking in hard rain.*
Middle: *After dozens of stream crossings, Adolfo feels comfortable wading barefoot.*
Bottom: *Who needs a swim suit? Shorts, windpants and boxers work just fine for Josue, Rafael and Amilcar.*

Although Identity receives government grants, Diego says, "Most funding we get is specific to preventing HIV and pregnancy. No one wants to pay specifically to bring kids outside. People still don't understand the benefits of doing that."

The night before the trip, the five boys gather at Identity to spend the night, and I join them. I'd like to ask what each hopes to gain from the trip to West Virginia, but deep conversations will have to wait—at least until the five have finished shaving their heads.

Rafael stands in the bathroom and runs a hair clipper over Juan's scalp. I've seen this ritual before—my friend Andy shaved his head before through-hiking the Appalachian Trail. But I can't help but think something else is at work.

Rafael, Juan and Adolfo have been friends for two years, while Amilcar and Josue are new additions to the group. But already, they have all banded together like brothers. They tell jokes, play cards, wrestle and call each other a slew of dirty names. The hair-trimming seems like one more example of their clannishness. It makes sense. Over the past few years, each boy has survived in part by joining a gang. Although they claim to no longer run with the gangs, some still struggle to escape gang influence.

Diego tells me that in D.C., there are only two ways to leave a gang—get married or have a child. Just days ago, 16-year-old Adolfo sat in Diego's office distressed that gang members were calling his house every day, demanding that he see them. Adolfo, stocky and strong, sat crying, bewildered. "I can't wait until I turn 18," he wept, "so I can just get married and get out of here."

The day before, Adolfo led me to his mother's apartment wearing a blue bandana around his head. He said that if he wore it, the gang kids would not mess with him, and he frequently sees gang fights break out in his apartment parking lot. At Gaithersburg High School, gangs battle over hallways and claim certain bathrooms as their turf.

In D.C., the gangs gather by nationality. El Salvadoran gangs recruited Adolfo, Josue, Pablo and Amilcar, while Peruvian gangs held sway over Juan. For young immigrant Latinos, the danger lies on many fronts—they are despised by the American-born Latinos as well as African Americans.

In the bathroom at Identity, I watch each boy take his turn with the clippers, brush away the clippings, then wrap a blue bandana around his head, tying a small knot in the front. Given their struggles with gangs, it's odd for them to don what is essentially a gang symbol. But maybe this is a way to demonstrate loyalty to each other, rather than some allegiance to their past.

I understand their desire to band together—soon they'll walk into the unknown. Just two months prior, none of the five boys ever had set foot in a forest. For most Central and South Americans, the concept of wilderness adventure is completely foreign. "In El Salvador, people work the land, so they equate nature with labor," says Eugenio Arene, executive director of the Council of Latino Agencies, an umbrella group of 40 organizations that provide services to immigrants. "Just think about water. There is no infrastructure for water, and people see it as a means for survival. Fishing is not recreational; it's an important source of food."

In early June, I had joined BCM trip leader David Rosen and four of the kids on a warm-up hike along the Potomac River. The first sunny weekend in weeks had drawn throngs of hikers, decked out in the finest synthetic shorts and low-cut hikers. I walked along with Adolfo, who sported a black button down emblazoned with a red dragon, baggy black shorts and tennis shoes with loose laces. At every turn, Adolfo drew nervous glances from the mostly Caucasian crowd. This is not unlike how they are treated at school, where they have had little contact with Gringos. The white kids at school don't even look at them, and the boys assumed at first that I and the other adult trip leaders would be "stiff," like all other Gringos.

The first Sunday in August, we drive north on West Virginia Highway 33, as low pressure settles in, bringing early spring temperatures and a cold downpour. Josue presses against the van's rain-streaked windows to watch a broad river flowing beside the two-lane road. I notice that the mere sight of

The Identity bathroom becomes a makeshift barbershop when Juan and his friends shave their heads the night before the trip.

A midstream boulder makes a nice diving platform—and Adolfo takes the plunge.

water makes him anxious to swim. Parking at the Seneca Rocks Ranger station, we walk down to a low concrete bridge where drainage pipes empty into an inky creek.

This is neither an attractive time nor place to swim, but the boys don't care. They quickly strip down to their boxers and slip into the cold water with the rain falling down. They splash wildly and battle each other to see who can hold his breath under water the longest. I can hardly remember my first touch of wild-running water, but I hope the moment was as fine as this.

We think the boys might also like to stand on the 2,100-foot summit of Seneca Rocks, so we schedule a day hike for Monday. As we march up the summit trail, I walk with Juan, a 17-year-old with an angular face that appears sharply serious. Quiet by nature, he has spoken few words to me the past couple of days.

Born in Lima, Peru, Juan came to the United States six years ago with his grandmother. His mother and father had moved to Washington, D.C. the year before. His father drives for a company that hosts parties, and his mother cleans houses. Juan tells me that his father has been pressuring him to drop out of school and get a job. After his 10th grade year, Juan did drop out, and didn't attend for most of last year.

When I spoke with Eugenio Arene (from the Council of Latino Agencies), he told me that it's common for young immigrants to work to help support their families. Eugenio says that about 2 million El Salvadorans live in the US, and each sends an average of $300 a month back to their home country. "That adds up to about 50 percent of the GNP of El Salvador," he says. "They send back home more than El Salvador is able to export in coffee."

Although Juan is from Peru, his situation is similar to that of young El Salvadorans. While away from school, Juan began to hang around D.C. gang members. Fortunately, some friends encouraged him to join Identity, though he resisted at first. "I said no—no one was going to change me," Juan declares.

But his heart changed, and Juan now looks forward to the new school year, as well as a new direction in life. We stride hard toward the summit of Seneca Rocks, and I ask if he's thought much about his future. "I don't know what I want to do," he says, "but I want to do something good."

On Wednesday we begin our four-day, 20-mile trek through the Otter Creek Wilderness. At the trailhead, the boys groan beneath the weight of their packs, stuffed with 45 pounds of gear. Fiddling with his hiking poles, Josue, 15, asks why we're carrying the sticks. I go into my gear-head dissertation on weight distribution and balance, but it's all "blah blah blah" to Josue. He proclaims the poles will serve as fine weapons to fight off attacking bears. His buddies agree this is a fine idea and begin to parry and thrust, swatting each other in the butt. I'm heartened to learn that the teenage urge to poke one's buddy in the ass crosses all cultural lines.

Leaving the trailhead, we walk into the forest, with mist rising in the hemlocks and heavy rain splashing off thick leaves of rhododendron. Our trail follows the bank of a broad, shallow creek that stretches some 10 miles. Otter Creek loses elevation gradually, forming cascades and ▶

LIKE-MINDED PROGRAMS

Adventure programs are like children—they come in all shapes and sizes. Some serve as therapy for troubled youth, while others focus on education. There are national programs and those that target local communities. These days, demand is increasing for wilderness programs. Here are a few organizations that strive to educate inner-city kids and expand their horizons.

Outward Bound USA in Golden, Colorado, operates 750 wilderness courses in 20 US states. In 2003, it launched a $180,000 scholarship fund for the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center in Providence, Rhode Island. That money covered tuition and travel costs for 48 disadvantaged students, who attended two- and three-week courses in a wide range of activities, from sailing to backpacking. 866-467-7651; www.outwardbound.com.

Wilderness Opportunities in Crested Butte, Colorado, runs wilderness therapy programs for kids across the country, but its seven-day "outreach" trips focus on youth from Colorado cities. The four-year-old company works with churches, Big Brothers-Big Sisters and other youth centers to identify disadvantaged kids. The kids enjoy a week of team-building exercises on the western slopes of Colorado, including ropes courses and rock climbing. Wilderness Opportunities continues to work with the kids up to six months after a trip. 970-349-2590; www.wildernessopp.com.

National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) in Lander, Wyoming, provides four to six scholarships each year to Summer Search, a San Francisco-based non-profit that places low-income, at-risk youth in summer programs. Kids from Boston to Seattle have used these scholarships ($3,000 value) to hike 30 days through Wyoming's Wind River Range and kayak in Alaska. 800-710-NOLS (6657); www.nols.edu.

Back to Earth in Berkeley, California, works with College Track, an organization that mentors at-risk high school students in the Bay Area. Each year, Back to Earth takes more than 30 teens from College Track on six-day backpacking trips to the Sierra. CEO Ari Derfel says, "We teach wilderness survival, but we focus on helping kids discover who they really are." 510-528-3987; www.backtoearth.org.

waterfalls that tumble down into pools the color of iced tea. About an hour into the hike, Adolfo's hand begins to swell from a sting, and we stop along the path to give him some Benadryl. Even though he's obviously suffering, he never complains.

I'm impressed that, despite stings, tired legs and relentless rain, the boys' enthusiasm rarely flags. Each time the trail drops back down toward the creek, their spirits soar. I watch them don their water shoes—their favorite piece of gear—and grasp a rope that spans 20 feet of rushing water.

Rafael dips his head into the frigid water. He whips his face out with a gasp, looks at me and shouts, "When you put your head in the water you have a new brain! The cold makes you forget everything."

As Juan crosses, the boys laugh at him, hollering, "Look, it's El Niño Juan!" A sleeping bag stuffed in a white trash bag hangs from the bottom of Juan's pack, and from behind it looks like an immense diaper. Rafael yells, "You better hold on tight, or you'll crap your diaper!" I laugh so hard I nearly fall into the water.

A day into the trip, four of the boys seem to be in full swing, already comfortable in the wilderness. But I am not sure if Josue is enjoying himself. He frequently asks how much farther we have to hike, yet he's the most enthusiastic about snapping photos along the trail. After setting up camp, I ask Josue to sit and talk with me on a large moss-covered boulder as the cool of night settles in.

Just a month before the trip, Josue was released after serving two years in a youth correctional facility. His father called Diego, desperate to get his son into Identity. "My PO [parole officer] told me that the next time I do something, I'll get 'juvey' for life," Josue says.

Involved with the police since age 10, Josue has escaped from several facilities. He talks tough about the escapes, but his voice grows quiet when he describes running with the gang MS-13. When asked why he was sentenced to the correctional facility, Josue drops his head slightly, picks at his fingernails and mutters that they were "hurting a lot of people."

"How?" I ask.

"With bats," he utters softly.

Josue falls silent, and I can hear the thrum of the creek below. I ask, "Was it different when you were throwing a brick through a window than when you were hurting somebody?"

"No, not really, it was all the same thing," he says. "I don't know why. It's like when y'all say it's fun being out in the mountains, it makes you feel real good, gets your adrenaline going. That's what doing stuff like that did for me."

Early the next morning, rays of light shine through thick fog hanging in the trees. Adolfo and Rafael carefully tie yellow fuzzy lures to lengths of fishing line wrapped around sticks. Rafael, wearing a fleece hat, blue nylon pants and rain shell, casts his line into a pool beneath a waterfall and watches intently.

Fishing in the creek reminds the boys of life back in El Salvador, where their grandfathers would cast nets into the river. As Adolfo tosses a line, he says he also used to fish with his father when he lived in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, he doesn't speak to his father anymore. He doesn't even know his phone number. Adolfo's father still lives in Los Angeles, and Adolfo moved from there to escape the gangs and live with his mother in Maryland. Angry that his son moved away, Adolfo's father—a US citizen—refuses to pass along residency to his son, a necessary first step toward becoming a citizen. As a result, Adolfo remains "undocumented," as do Amilcar and Juan. They are unable to have a bank account, social security number or much of anything this country has to offer.

Adolfo's story is a reminder that my America is very different from his America. But out here, Adolfo is free from the trappings of society—no borders or walls, just an endless stretch of water and trees. No "documentation" is required to belong in the wilderness; we all slip naturally into the mix. From the bank, I look down and see the reflection of a boy, his calm eyes and brown face blending with the copper-toned water. This place is becoming a part of them—a place to clear their minds and see the world from a different perspective.

At the base of a small rapid, Rafael dips his head into the frigid water. He whips his face out with a gasp, looks at me and shouts, "When you put your head in the water you have a new brain! The cold makes you forget everything. When you open your eyes under the water, life is running faster down there!"

On Friday afternoon, more rain falls on our campsite perched above the creek bank. Rafael and Amilcar stand toe to toe beneath a nylon fly, engaged in a form of hand grappling. With hands like rocks, Rafael overpowers Amilcar's slight limbs. He seems to have adopted 16-year-old Amilcar as his little brother, and he's now fulfilling the time-honored role of all big brothers—teaching Amilcar how to fight.

The coming school year could be dangerous for Amilcar, as a group of kids have threatened to beat him up. "There's always people trying to be better fighters than you," he says.

The boys haven't completely escaped their worries, even down in this deep forest. In a few days, the peacefulness

Amilcar may have found here will be a memory. And I wonder if that memory can survive the battles he'll face back home. But I'm hopeful.

On Saturday, our final morning in the forest, we open our eyes to a blue sky. The sunshine and the promise of a warm bed loosen our stride, and the last five miles of trail rush by in a blur of green and brown. We reach the gravel parking lot and then drive out of the wilderness, returning to a cabin to clean our gear. That night in the cabin, we lounge in a semicircle, as each boy shares his impressions of the trip, though most offer few words—like they're still trying to process the whole thing. Then, Adolfo says something that makes me sit up. "I felt emotions out there that I had never felt before," he says. And I wait for more, but he's quiet again, and I don't press him to explain. Teenagers so rarely lay bare their hearts, it's a raw moment, and I feel my words might scratch it. Instead, I nod at him and sense great hope.

A month after our trip, I call Candace to see how the boys are faring. She says they've been bubbling over about their BCM experience, and the previous week a few of them went on a canoe trip to Shenandoah National Park. Rafael and Adolfo floated along in a boat, talking about how they love being outdoors.

Sometimes I worry what direction their lives will take, but then I think back to the day Rafael and I stood in the dark tunnel beneath the street. I can picture him standing beside me in the blackness. Then, slowly he turns, and I watch as he walks away, strolling toward the sunlight. HOOKED

BIG CITY MOUNTAINEERS

Does this stuff work?

There's pretty much zero scientific evidence to quantify the effectiveness of adventure education programs, but the growth of Big City Mountaineers signals it must be doing something right. The 14-year-old organization has led 900 kids on wilderness trips, and runs 25 outings each year. Currently, it runs trips out of Northern California, Denver, Seattle, Boston, Chicago and Washington, D.C. "Our goal is to double the program in two years and run about 40 trips in 2004," says Mark Godley, BCM's executive director. He adds that the psychology department at Contra Costa College in California has been developing scientifically valid research to measure BCM's effect on the lives of its participants. Contact BCM at 800-644-2122; www.bigcitymountaineers.org.