



ARE YOU KID-DING?

Resistance turned resilience: Hiking with teenagers for a class in confidence

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Hiking Wilsons Promontory Southern Circuit with Mount Evelyn Christian School students opens doors to self-confidence and resilience.

"Because the teachers hate me," is the sweaty response from the continuously complaining 15-year-old as to why he was in the most difficult hiking group on the MECS Prom Camp. "That way they don't have me hanging around base camp for three days." His athletic, teen build and energetic aura hinted at the more likely reason he'd been selected to pound the three-day trail from Tidal River to Waterloo Bay and on to Sealers Cove.

Radiating heat from rugged granitic rock faces smothers conversation as the group of heavily laden Year 8 students trek the path towards Little Oberon Bay. Seeking solace under sheoaks, embracing hints of cool ocean breeze, adjusting and readjusting packs in search of the sweet spot; oversized shoes generate demand for Elastoplast repairs to blistering feet as a steady rhythm develops, fate is accepted, complaints lessen, and grabs into scroggin filled ziplock bags increase.

In a trend soon to be solidified, teens become toddlers at the sight of sand, waves, and steep boulders. As if agility training is already required after four kilometres, packs are shed, shoes tossed aside, and boulders scaled. Warnings to keep feet dry go unheeded as sand settling in socks create hotspots heading for a fortunately dry Growlers Creek crossing into Oberon Bay.

Along the sun-drenched track to Telegraph Junction black dust clutches perspiring legs and coastal breezes fade. A discontented murmuring amongst students confirms the disconnect between the kilometres to be covered on day one in the camp brochure and distance already covered. The, "Are we there yet?" increase as the additional seven kilometres are added to the day's agenda. Questions and complaints are unlikely to have been less with Telegraph Saddle as the Trailhead. The hope of a 'swim' at Waterloo Bay keeps eyes peeled on the horizon and determination in strides.

After 15.7 kilometres, tea tree and messmates give yield to the white siliceous sands and the incandescent blue of Waterloo Bay. The outgoing tide seemingly extracting self-doubt and uncertainty, the salt air filling with a prospect of success, capability, and confidence. Receding waves lap up vestiges of the 'impossible', invigorating the group's last 1.5 kilometres to the campground as hats, food, and clothing are rescued from the inlet crossing scrambling up to Little Waterloo Bay Track.

Excitement builds as tent poles poke and bend finding their correct order and angle, sleeping mats inflate for hopefully the required duration, and pack contents are strewn through sleeping quarters. "Remember no food in tents. Who needs wombats when you have each other!" The initial aversion to hiking and physical exertion dissipates in the steam of boiling noodle packets, apple



crumble deserts, and hot chocolates. Torchlight hides the reality of the drop toilet experience and lurking native animals hustle tired bodies into bed. As laughter roars and warnings for silence fly, who was it that didn't want to hike?

Alarms ring early, in anticipation of severe afternoon storms. A speedy pace is set through an ever-inclining understory rich in lichen, moss, and blue wrens, with a towering canopy of all things eucalyptus overhead. Shortly before Kersops Peak, pangs for morning tea are aroused by the all-pervading honey scent of the *Kunzea ambigua*, strong enough to fool a bear. The view from Kersops Peak temporarily suspends all other form of teen conversation. Xbox has finally met its match in the spectacular vistas spanning the secluded Refuge Cove, misty mountain coverings, and the huge expanse of the Tasman Sea.

Teenage egos jostling for position slowly meld into team as 'can't' metamorphizes into 'can'. Passing through the once thriving whaling station of Refuge Cove and on to Sealers Cove, the site of a timber mill in the mid 1800s sets the backdrop for the evening. Spared from the tent-tearing storms and rain-ravaging Tidal River, Trangias prepare dinners, burning pancakes and bracken simultaneously. Tents without a fly bode disaster under the cumulonimbus-heavy skies, whilst guy ropes are set and drainage dug for the pending downpour.

The final morning brings with it lessons in tent living, leaks, and

leeches. A crack of dawn departure avoids disaster at Sealers Creek where the tide already runs high. Hope beams wide as a rainbow points in the direction of the treasured trail end. Trudging through the temperate rainforest, ancient fern gullies, across boardwalks, and over swamps, Windy Hill marks difficulty completed as the trail traverses towards its close.

Three days leave negativity, suspicion, self-doubt, and uncertainty on the track. Telegraph Saddle is reached with rucksacks lighter and spirits fuller with determination, resilience, courage, and celebration of personal triumph over challenge, and a request to "Do it again right now". Confidence and community gradually collected in an environment where the crashing of waves and whistling of birds replace relentless pings of Insta posts and Facebook messages. Where chats lasted longer than a snap and the memories of fun, achievement, triumph, and God's blessing will last so much longer than a fortnight.

Jarka is an ex Mount Evelyn Christian School student. Her two adult children also attended MECS. She is passionate about seeing individuals identify, embrace, and live out their God-imbued potential wholeheartedly. Next to her day job in organisational development, Jarka is a sailing, hiking, reading, and writing enthusiast. She was walking a 450km trail in Germany with her husband when she wrote this bio.

