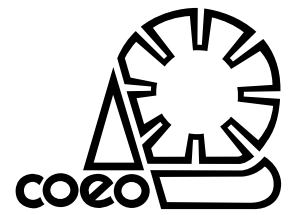


# Pathways

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## Letter From an Enthusiast

By Sarah Simone with support from Tim O'Connell

*I am standing on the shoreline of a rushing river, identifying hazards and what I think are safe zones, but it all looks blurry. The water is loud, chaotic, angry. My nerves are weak—the power of the river is overwhelming. I spent the day pushing down my fears, jumping in the water and swimming the rapids, not with joy and comfort, but with determination to overcome fear. Was this blind trust in my instructors, or an attempt to show the river and myself that I can move with it? I am not sure which—I could only keep pushing through. I am exhausted. My legs quiver at the thought of moving my feet that have sunk into the soggy shoreline.*

*We were to perform a river rescue training scenario. As a collective, our group decided to move upstream and cross there. It is flat current. We swam in pairs along the way, my weary mind lost focus of the shore to which I was headed, and fear of the rapids below took hold. Doing the front crawl, my chest constricted and I cannot breathe. "Just tread water for a minute," I thought. The current is pulling me closer to the rapids, "try to swim!" I can't, I'm panicking, my life jacket isn't keeping me up enough...My head dips under (this doesn't make sense, I am a strong open water swimmer), the current is pulling me closer, I yell out and my buddy swimmer busts through my panic, gives me focus and courage to keep going. I dig deep with my buddy shouting to get moving. I've got this! Painfully, I back-crawl to shore because the front crawl feels suffocating. The shore feels an eternity away, but my buddy and I get me there. The rescue scenario was still happening, but I was not supposed to be the rescue. She goes on to join the scenario. I take a minute to collect myself before rejoining the group.*

Dear Adventurers & Curious Spirits,

I have a yearning to get outside. Beyond the limits of my town, exploring rivers and forests unknown to me. The idea of wandering out into it is simple, yet the planning and preparation can be overwhelming when you do not know

what you do not know. Joining an educational course on the matter seems the most logical solution to learning. An outdoor leadership course would be the right direction. However, this would entail hands-on education, possibly out in the field trialing skills while building them. Amidst lockdowns and fluctuating public health rules and guidelines, it was a blessing to find the River Roots program. It is hosted by MHO Adventures, a highly regarded organization in the outdoor industry. MHO provides adventure and educational canoe trips for a wide variety of age groups around Canada.

River Roots is purposefully designed to be an immersive whitewater canoe guiding foundations course. This program offers participants first-hand experience in outdoor guiding education. Upon completion, many relevant certifications are earned, including Whitewater Rescue Technician (through Boreal River Rescue), Paddle Canada Whitewater Tandem Canoeing, Outdoor Council of Canada Field Leader in Overnights, Paddling, and Hiking. Not only do participants leave with tangible proof of skills to provide potential employers, they gain an immense amount of intangible personal growth and knowledge to apply to their professional practice. For someone new to the outdoor leadership field with little or no experience, River Roots aims to provide a foundation that can confidently be applied to working in the field.

Over the course of 42 days, two instructors and seven students worked through the lessons and skills required to guide whitewater expedition canoeing. After three weeks of building skills, training and practicing, we went out on expedition. We traveled 21 days through the backwoods of Quebec down the breathtaking Harricana River, leading us to the remote northern town of Moosonee, Ontario. Every day we moved over the same water and through the

same challenges together. Yet each of us walked away with a different story to tell. We experienced the same weather but weathered it differently. Each one of us went into River Roots with a different goal for the program. One of mine was to face my fears of whitewater and develop a better understanding of an element of nature that was so foreign to me. I was also really looking forward to improving my paddling skills and further developing skills such as navigation and trip planning (especially when it came to food preparation, both pre-expedition and once on trail). Due to my cultural heritage, I love to feed people! Hunger is something every person understands; it is an easy common ground from which to start forming bonds and a sense of community with food around the table.

We made it back in one piece with our own trials and triumphs to share and process. The community that was formed over the course of the MHO River Roots program is one of the many factors that led to individual successes. We learned from seasoned and proficient instructors on technical skills (knot tying, paddle strokes, map reading, campfire cooking, etc.). These same instructors, and many other leaders in the industry, brought informed conversation to important topics such as burnout, positive praise, creating community on trip and risk management, to name a few. However, the magic of building the community I spoke of happened as each of our (students in River Roots) talents and strengths shined through. This added so much value to the program that I didn't expect! We learned to lean on each other, ask for a helping hand where someone else excelled, to step in and offer confidence and praise. Sitting around the campfire having dinner at the end of the night hashing out the successes and learning moments from the day, our community formed. Trust in each other and trust in one's own skills grew. Forming a community is not unique to the MHO River Roots program. However, it is something many educational programs strive to achieve with varying degrees

of success. From my experience in life, when you are surrounded by people you can trust, it becomes a platform for personal growth and trust in oneself to develop. When trust and confidence are combined, I have found the result to be courage. Courage becomes the willingness to attempt the things that one is fearful of, and whether failure or success follows that attempt, it is okay either way. Success is already achieved in the willingness to be vulnerable and try. Whitewater was a paralyzing fear of mine. Paralyzing to the point that standing far up on the edge of the river looking at it, I was stopped in my tracks. I was able to find joy and playfulness through skillful breakdown of reading the water, being given space and time to bring myself to try paddling maneuvers, and never feeling like I was being judged for my fear by my peers or instructors. I went from holding my breath and clenching my teeth with a death grip on my paddle as we approached rapids to anticipation, laughter and executing maneuvers such as catching an eddy or riding a wave train for fun.

A picture is worth a thousand words but standing amongst the rugged untamed beauty of our land and rivers leaves me breathless. The only way to understand for yourself is to get out and experience it. Taking an educational course on outdoor leadership helped me achieve confidence and knowledge so I may get out and explore where my heart leads me, beyond the city limits. This program also engaged me in a way that allowed me to face fears that may have otherwise been restricting to me. Education is invaluable: I went out seeking knowledge to become comfortable in a foreign space and possibly face my fears. Having completed the MHO River Roots program, I learned many interpersonal and technical skills, I learned to trust myself, to listen to my body and to my peers, to lean into hard situations, and to lean on others for support.

The river is an interesting teacher when you take the time to listen to the lessons

she holds within her. Where she creates rapids, her water churns, bubbles, sounds angry and loud—the river looks violent. The harder you try to muscle your way over or through her, the more likely the river will try to tip your boat over, soak you and spit you out. Once I understood the subtleties of the currents, to see the little signs and read the water, when to ride it out and where to lean in, paddling the river became much like how I aim to make my way through life. Leaning into the hard moments that need just a little more effort, slipping into an eddy when I need a pause and taking the time I need to regroup, or just sitting back and enjoying

the ride. Learning to move with the river (and life) rather than muscling through it was a key takeaway for me.

*It is Angus and I as leaders of the day. His easy-going love of whitewater balances out my uneasy nervousness. Today, he looks at me with simple joy and playful egging on: "You got this, you're sterning!" with my paddle outstretched in his hand for me to take. Everything in me wants to shy away. He is the stronger sterner, he can get us through the rapids with ease, and I can paddle in the bow. But then would I really be doing myself any justice if I bailed out of this opportunity? With this added boost of confidence and*





*Angus' eager smile for me to take my place in the canoe, I agree. As he sits in the bow, we discuss what he sees ahead, agree on how to approach it and how to run the rapid. With his confidence in me, my own confidence is growing. Ahead of us lies a widespread rapid that can be read and paddled successfully. We tell the group this mission is to "try to catch every single eddy." And we do. I cannot hold back laughing and I am bubbling over in joy as we slip into the first eddy. Angus turns around and gives me a paddle high five to celebrate the success! We head out of the eddy and identify the next, leapfrogging down the rapid. I can hear the whoops and hollers of fun being had by each boat over the churning hum of the river.*

The goal of the MHO River Roots Program is to create a learning opportunity for students to become well rounded outdoor professionals. Those who graduate from the program will be hard working, growth-oriented leaders that have the skills, experience, and certifications to manage risk, make decisions, be environmental stewards, and inspire others. Details can be found at: <https://mhoadventures.com/training/riverroots/>

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