

Andrew Argue: How I Caught Fire

I sat there, muscles screaming; I had been rubbing sticks together for six days. It was 10 degrees and all I could hear was the wind on the juniper trees and my spindle plunging into the fireboard. The sticks were smoking stronger than ever before, and I pushed harder than I ever had. As the sticks engulfed in flames, I felt I had conquered the wilderness.

At fifteen years old, I was sent to a behavior modification camp in the mountains of Utah for drug, alcohol, and family rehabilitation. It was December of 2005, and once I got to the facility I was physically stripped down, while emotionally I was left feeling desolate. I spent my first seven days in complete solitude in Utah's West Desert. In order to join the rest of the group I had to complete a series of challenging tasks. I had to make a spoon, build a backpack out of wood, and make a fire. After completing the backpack and spoon in 1 day, I spent the next six days rubbing stick trying to make a fire.

I spent the next seventy days rebuilding what was broken in myself. I hiked the mountains, built fires, created shelters, and lived without running water, electricity, or heat. I spent Christmas, New Years, and my birthday in my new home, the wilderness. There was something powerful about depending only on myself, no matter what barriers stood in my way.

After washing all the dirt out of my hair, I immediately got on the plane for Costa Rica, where I would attend a therapeutic boarding school for the next two years of my life. The purpose of this school was to promote personal growth in a therapeutic environment, preparing us for immersion into regular society. We all had our own therapists to talk with individually as well as weekly group sessions. In addition to traditional therapy, we also spent one week a month on "aventuras," where we would travel to the mountains of Peru, volcanoes in Nicaragua, or live with the natives in Panama. During my time at this school, I saw more of the world than most people see in a lifetime.

After I adjusted to the rigidity of the school, I emerged as one of the top students in my class. I was elected to be an honors student, started recycling program, created a newsletter, became fluent in Spanish, and completed my degree a year early.

Although I was feeling accomplished and confident in Costa Rica, I was slightly apprehensive to return to society with my new freedom. I had been under complete and total supervision 24-hours a day for over two years. How would I respond? Would I relapse into old behavior? Was I ready?

When I left Costa Rica, I began my college career at the University of Tampa. At just seventeen years old, two years after leaving the wilderness, I was finally given complete freedom. When I began school, I arranged student loans, became a resident assistant, and joined Beta Alpha Psi the next semester. With my life in my own hands, I created a spark that burst into flames for the next 3 years of my college career.

By my fourth semester I was elected Vice President of Beta Alpha Psi and promoted to Head Resident (Supervisor of ten RA's and desk assistants) in Residence Life, all at the age of eighteen. Since that semester I have been elected as President of Beta Alpha Psi, I have won three speech competitions in the topic of sustainability, and expanded the chapter from 47 to 89. I have successfully transformed our Chapter of Beta Alpha Psi into one of the most recognized and distinguished Chapters in the world. In my tenure as President, all members of the organization have received an internship or job by the time they have graduated with their undergraduate or masters degree.

Throughout my years at the University of Tampa, I have become an innovative, creative, adaptive, assertive, and insightful leader. I have risen to numerous challenges, and have broken down the immense barriers that have stood in my way over the years. It has been said before that adversity builds character; but in my case, adversity revealed my true character. I proved to myself that I am capable of impacting the world around me. Whether it was sitting in the dirt of Utah, or sitting in an executive board meeting in Beta Alpha Psi, I was able to create a spark in the world and watch it catch fire.

Throughout my life I have known what I wanted and worked hard for it. This summer I will start an internship with PricewaterhouseCoopers, which will hopefully lead to a job offer. I want to be a CPA in the State of Florida and a Partner at PwC. A Masters Degree from the University of Tampa will help me expand my knowledge to achieve that goal.