

Liz Aksamit
Seek the Joy
Summer of 2017

Ogichi Daa Kwe is by no means your ordinary summer camp. It is a summer camp that aims to empower young women through an experience with Mother Nature like no other. By taking away all the comforts of everyday life, it gives back a sense of self and purpose. It encourages young women to push the boundaries and exceed expectations. I knew this when I accepted a job as a camp counselor there but I didn't fully understand it, not yet.

Counselors are required to show up a month before the campers for training and bonding purposes. Within the first week of being at the camp I was put through an intense remote wilderness medical training course. I learned and was tested on an extensive array of possible medical scenarios that could occur while out on trip. It was also quickly put in perspective how demanding this job was going to be.

I had gone into the summer with such confidence in my competence of backcountry camping. I was certain that my three months spent in a wilderness program in the Georgia mountains would be sufficient experience, but now I was starting to question that. Was I really cut out for this? While part of me was doubtful, an even bigger part of me was curious and ready for a challenge.

I had now spent over a month preparing for this moment. My dorysack was packed, our gear had been carefully curated and checked over, and the van was loaded with everything we would need for the next ten days.

As I sat in the van crammed full of equipment and sleeping campers I couldn't help but acknowledge my looming anxiety and fears about what was to come. How did I always seem to get myself in these situations? I wasn't qualified for this. Who in their right mind thought I was capable of navigating myself and five campers from Canada back to the United States in ten days. My only saving grace was that I was with Molly and Chammy, my two co-counselors. At least they were seasoned veterans with multiple battles under their belts. Compared to them I was just the rookie soldier venturing into unknown territory.

After three hours of driving the van stopped and without hesitation everyone inside it suddenly sprang alive and started unloading. We had two Duluth canvas bags for our dorysacks and tents, three wooden crates, referred to as wannigans, to hold food and cooking supplies, life jackets, paddles, and three canoes. Within minutes the wannigans and Duluths were strapped into the canoes, each girl had a paddle in hand and a life jacket on their back, and all three canoes were ready to be launched.

I, on the other hand was clinging to land, reluctant to takeoff. We had just been in a van. Everyone had just been asleep. This had to be some kind of joke. We weren't just going to leave just like that. Were we? Can't we all just take a second, maybe a few deep breaths, and just chill for a second before we have to start paddling for eight miles? I looked to my co-counselors for reassurance but none could be found. They were ready to go, one foot in the canoe one foot on land ready to push off. Apparently I was the only one thinking this way.

Not wanting to look any less enthusiastic or prepared than them I assumed position as they had. I looked over to Molly and asked, “Ready?” in a way that made it seem like I had been the one waiting on everyone else.

She looked around checking off a mental list in her head and responded, “Let’s fucking go!”

Before long, I realized why my boat had been dubbed the rookie canoe. My campers, Mary and Caroline, were both first-year Ogichi campers and neither had much experience camping or canoeing. Mary was what one might classify as a classic “tomboy.” She was a bigger girl, which served to be an advantage because she was a stronger paddler. She was a quick learner with a good attitude. She was pretty independent and adapted to situations easily. Not much to worry about with her. Caroline, on the other hand, required more patience. She was easily distracted and no matter how many times I reminded her of the proper paddling technique it never seemed to be enough. She proved to be one of my biggest sources of frustration but also entertainment.

Eight miles of paddling and one portage later we made it to our first campsite. It was absolutely breathtaking. I hadn’t realized how much I had missed being out in the open and living outside. We were right next to a waterfall. I felt like I was now allowed to take the deep breath I had been waiting for all day. I took a moment to think about and try to fully absorb what it was we were doing. We were taking a trip that required us to paddle all the way from our drop off point in Ontario, Canada, back to camp in I-Fall, Minnesota. Our route was one the boys camp, Kooch-i-Ching, took their younger campers on. It had never been attempted by Ogichi girls, and the complete route had not been completed in years.

There was a sense of determination that accompanied our trip. Molly, Chammy, and I each had our doubts about our ability to actually complete this trip, but we all tried to remain hopeful and maintain the attitude that failure was not an option. More than anything we wanted the bragging rights of being the first. The reality of it all, though, was that succeeding meant that in ten days we had to paddle over one hundred miles, through seven lakes, multiple rivers, a couple of Indian reservations, and take five portages all the while being responsible for the safety and wellbeing of five thirteen year-old girls. We were up against a challenge, but we were also up for the fight.

By the fourth day we had figured each other out pretty well. Molly, whose kooky appearance matched her personality, was the leader of the group and for good reason. She could somehow perfectly balance the role of being the camper’s best friend but also the person they feared the most. She knew when to be goofy and when to be stern. Chammy was the cool-headed easy going one. She held such a humble wisdom about everything going on around her. Both of them were funny, with kind of a cynical sense of humor that many times served as a sigh of relief.

I was mostly just there, pretending to know what I was doing. Led into the situation by misleading expectation,. I felt like I was playing a constant game of follow the leader while simultaneously trying to be the leader. Together we made a good team. We genuinely enjoyed each other's company and quickly bonded over our shared frustrations and accomplishments. Our

counselors' tent served as our shared sanctuary away from the vicious mosquitos, the campers, and the trials of the day. We came to look forward to our hours together talking, laughing, and learning about each other's lives. Together, we took delight in our private ventures out to the edge of a cliff or sitting along the shoreline to indulge in a secret cigarette break whenever we managed to herd the campers into one place long enough to sneak away.

On our hardest day we had to paddle 23 kilometers (roughly 14 miles) through two rivers and had a portage over a mile long. One of the lakes we had to cross was called Calm Lake. Some of the boys from Kooch-i-Ching had informed us earlier that "Calm Lake is in fact NOT calm." The thing about that day that I will never forget, however, was the dreadful portage.

From the beginning everything about it was unpleasant. At first we couldn't even find it, because our trip logs were vague and dated. Once we did, it was like a whirlwind of movement. Everyone leaped into action and started unloading and loading the Duluths and wannigans out of the canoes and onto their backs. It was as if some switch had been flicked and everyone was in high gear except me, who apparently had gone into slow motion.

Before I knew it there I was alone, just me and my canoe. I stood there for a few seconds just staring at my canoe, hating its existence. Then I started going through the steps of how to self-load in my head. Okay, one hand on each side of the gunnels, prop it up on your knee, rock back and forth, and flip. I went through the motions a few times with no success. Finally I managed to flip the canoe over and prop it up enough with my head to inch myself back into the yoke. I slowly lifted and tried to balance it on my shoulders as best I could and cautiously started walking along the path.

With each step, the already eighty-pound canoe seemed to get significantly heavier and heavier. I kept wanting to stop, to throw the canoe off my shoulders and wait until someone came back for me, but I refused to accept that defeat. I wanted to prove to myself more than anyone that I was capable of doing this.

"I can do this. There can't be that much longer," become my mantra as I trudged on.

Each incline seemed like a steep mountain. Each decline was a war with gravity. The canoe dug deeper and deeper into my shoulders pounding on every pressure point. My already devoured limbs were swarmed by mosquitos. I wanted to cry, I wanted to scream, I wanted this damn canoe off me. I kept looking up wishing to see light at the end of the path, but each time I got hopeful it seemed another mile was added onto my journey. I cursed each puddle I waded through and glared at each branch I knew was about to smack me in the face. I regretted every decision that had lead me to this moment. And then, after what seemed like hours but was really only a grueling twenty minutes, I reached the end.

I quickly learned that portages were only one of many monsters we would face along our odyssey. We went on to battle rapids, headwinds, Wild Potato Lake, shirtless Canadians invading our land, and the dreaded Boy Scouts. Each challenge was countered by the many delights we found along the way: the mysterious rope swing none of us could quite figure out at one campsite, the fresh blueberries at another. We learned to cherish each small gift we received from each other and from the world around us.

Paddling back into camp we felt like heroes returning home from war. We had accomplished something never done before. We were trailblazers and innovators. We had survived, unscathed, with smiles on our faces, to tell the tale.

I thought back to all my doubtful thoughts throughout the trip and challenged them with each accomplishment I never thought possible. I learned that despite my own skepticism, those around me never questioned my abilities or credentials. This journey and my time at Ogichi helped me to believe in myself and proved to me I can lead, I can fail, I can accomplish and all of those things are something to be proud of. I felt like I now could fully comprehend and embody what it meant to be a part of Ogichi Daa Kwe, to be a “strong, spirited woman.”

Authors note:

This experience could not have come at a more opportune moment in my life. I had just finished my Freshman year of college and was feeling beat down. A friend of mine who attend Ogichi as a camper suggested that I apply to be a counselor there for the summer. I’ve always struggled in putting myself in a leadership position but I took the risk and wound up getting the job. Little did I know I had completely underestimated what I had gotten myself into. Looking back on the situation I consider it to be a happy accident of life.

I ended up learning a lot about myself on our ten day trip in the the Canadian wilderness. I pushed myself outside of my comfort zone and challenged my beliefs about my abilities. I have a hard time acknowledging the things I do and am quick to be hard on myself. This experience gave me an opportunity to slow down among the chaos and appreciate myself for who I was.