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First Descents challenges young people with cancer, presenting real obstacles to fear, confront, and conquer.

By Jayme Moye



Janae stands on top of a giant boulder nearly fifty feet above the ground, leaning back in her harness, legs outstretched, feet planted on the rock—exactly as our guide has instructed us. She’s about to rappel off Campground Rock in Moab, Utah, her first such descent ever. And she’s crying.

Watching from the bottom, we can’t tell that Janae is in tears. We only know that the 24-year-old has been perched on the edge for much longer than it normally takes a new rappeller to summon her courage and go for it. We assume her hesitation means she’s freaking out. We assume correctly.

Our group has been in the rock-climbing mecca of Moab for three days now, participating in an adult climbing camp run by First Descents. This is our first major rappel. I’ve already taken my turn, and for me, it was no big deal. But I’m a journalist on assignment who has rappelled before. Watching Janae struggle, I remember my first time at a height that made my heart drop into my stomach.

I was the same age as her, and 80 feet above the ground climbing at Summersville Lake in West Virginia, when I got spooked—I’d never been that high. I felt dizzy every time I looked down. “You’ve so got this!” my friend Ken yelled up at me when I stopped climbing, frozen in fear.

Looking up at Janae, I wonder if she has the same thoughts going through her head as I did—weighing the disappointment of quitting versus the fear of continuing. I’ve only known her for a short time, but I know she can do it. We all know she can. The question is, what does she believe?

“You’ve so got this, Nae-Nae,” I yell, using her camp nickname. The others yell, too, chanting her name, calling out words of encouragement. We watch as one of our guides sets himself up on the rope beside her. He’s getting into position to rap

down with her, coaching her through the entire descent, if that’s what it takes.

Maybe his presence is the last piece of reassurance Janae needs. Maybe she decides, like I did that day in West Virginia, that she isn’t going to let fear stop her. She relaxes her brake arm on the rope, and lets out enough slack to take a small step backward over the edge. We shout our approval, high-fiving each other at the bottom. She descends slowly, keeping her feet on the wall, letting out just enough rope to take a step or two down at a time. She pauses often, and looks around, in wonder, she’ll tell us later, that she’s actually doing it.

When she hits the bottom, she’s got an incredulous grin on her face. “I did it,” she says quietly, almost a whisper. The others rush forward and engulf her in one hug after another. I stand back and watch, and realize I’m choked up. Someone cranks the ’80s music coming from the van. The lyrics from Scandal’s “The Warrior” make their way into my consciousness.

Shootin’ at the walls of heartache, bang, bang, I am the warrior yes I am the warrior and victory is mine.

I can’t help but laugh out loud as I step forward and hug Janae. She is the warrior, even if all she battled was her own self-doubt. Her achievement somehow feels like a victory for all of us.

Right before I left for this camp, I watched a documentary titled *Finding Joe* that articulated the philosophies of the late mythologist Joseph Campbell. One of the many poignant quotes that came from the experts interviewed in the film was “Put yourself in an uncomfortable situation about once every seven days.”

That concept is why each of the fifteen participants at First Descents chose to spend their summer vacation, taking time away from families and careers, at a rock climbing camp with strangers. Each is seeking the transformation that comes from pushing themselves beyond their comfort zone.

But there’s another reason. The First Descents campers have something else in common, something you can’t necessarily tell by looking at them, or even after getting to know them on the surface level. It’s not something they lead with, or a part of their lives that they share readily—they are all young adults fighting cancer.

The camp’s founder, Brad Ludden, started First Descents in 2001, after watching his young aunt battle the disease. His idea was simple: as a professional kayaker, he’d recreate the amazing moments he’d experienced on the water to help people struggling with cancer find a reprieve of fun, and maybe even peace.

Ludden’s vision of using the outdoors as a catalyst echoes another famous Joseph Campbell quote: “Find a place where there is joy and the joy will burn out the pain.”

What Ludden didn’t anticipate (and what studies on outdoor adventure therapy have since proven) is that many of the negative effects people experience from the stigma of having cancer as young adults—things like anxiety, low self-esteem, and isolation—can start to be reversed by overcoming authentic challenges in an organic setting. All First Descents does is provide the backdrop. The great outdoors provides the challenge.

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And it's working. In ten years, First Descents has grown from offering one kayaking camp in Colorado, to nearly 50 camps across the country, encompassing kayaking, climbing, surfing, and trekking. Almost 500 campers have signed up in 2012, and the first international camp was held in the spring. "I never expected this," Ludden says. "It's been wild to watch this thing grow."



What's wild for me is watching how strongly the campers bond. For many, it's their first time meeting another young adult with cancer. Kim, 26, tells me she has a lot of social anxiety. Looking at her, it's easy to understand why. Kim is unusually short and thin due to a growth hormone deficiency caused by radiation damage to her pituitary gland. She also suffers a speech impediment caused by radiation damage to her soft palate. A tumor destroyed some of the nerves in her face, disfiguring her smile.



But those things don't seem to matter so much at camp, where everyone is dealing with the effects of cancer. What matters is that Kim is one of the best climbers and makes everyone laugh with her unexpectedly wicked sense of humor. "I felt more comfortable there than I can ever remember in a group of people," she tells me after the week concludes. "I can't remember ever feeling so myself."



Everyone fits in at First Descents. Ludden tells me that normalization is a key part of the healing process. Because everyone at camp is going through the same thing, no one stands out as a cancer victim (the way they're perceived, intentionally or not, by their so-called normal peer group). And that's comforting, and connecting.

The community vibe is so strong that it's even hard for me, as a journalist trained in objectivity, to remain detached. I feel it most profoundly on the second-to-last day. After another glorious morning on the rock, we head down to the Colorado River for some down time. The camp director hands each of us a marker and instructs us to select two flat rocks. On one rock,

we write the things we want to be free from, things like fear and pain. On the other, we write the things we want to cultivate, like love and forgiveness.

The idea is to chuck your "bad" rock into the river and keep your "good" one. I'm surprised at how emotional I feel as I start to write, and I'm not even dealing with cancer. But I am dealing with divorce, and anxiety disorder. One of the words I write on my bad rock is ANGER. I realize I'm crying as I retrace it over and over. ANGER times ten. I hurl it as hard as I can into the water. I cringe a little at how loud a sound it makes when it breaks the water's surface. But the others don't even raise their heads. They get it.

Once we're back in the van heading to dinner, I ask the other women about their rocks. They tell me they wrote things like anger and sorrow and fear. They wrote body image issues. They wrote depression, anxiety, and confusion. They wrote the same things I did.

Interestingly, I don't feel sad. I feel lighter. We all do. And kind of giggly. Maybe it's because we let go of our bad rocks. Maybe it's because "Baby Got Back," Sir Mix-a-Lot's obnoxious hit from 1992, starts playing on the radio, and every one of us knows every word. *I like big butts and I cannot lie!*

Or maybe it's because we realize then that it doesn't matter what the cause—disease, divorce, death of a loved one—we've all got walls. We can choose to let them alienate us, we can choose to let them stop us. Or we can call ourselves rock stars and start climbing together.

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with one difference—

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Out Living It

—Chris Kassar

Michael Brown and the crew at Serac Adventure Films have done it again. Their latest film, *Out Living It* skillfully weaves together beautiful imagery, truthful interviews, and triumphant moments to create a compelling story about folks who manage to find hope and strength amidst cancer diagnoses.

The film takes us on a gripping journey as we follow a group of cancer survivors embarking on a kayak adventure with First Descents. Brown hones in on a few members of the group with particularly poignant stories. They share their fears, their thoughts, their small victories, and their tears with unmatched honesty and we become attached to these courageous women and men.

They are just like us: a vibrant mother of two, a beautiful girl in her 20s, a young athletic guy—with one difference—they have been forced to face death. We watch them gain confidence on the river, bond as a group, do things they thought they would never get the chance to do, and most importantly, we see the transformation as they forget about their cares for a week and just live.

You won't see kayaks hucking off waterfalls or swirling through gnarly rapids, but that's not the point. Brown's gritty portrayal of the bravery needed to fight cancer and the power of nature to provide a brief respite from this constant battle inspires more than any kayak porn-filled film can. But, be warned—after seeing this film you may find you're filled with the overwhelming urge to get outside and with a renewed sense of gratitude for each breath.

