

"We Did It!" Success Stories from High Rocks

High Rocks takes pride in the achievements of its HR alums, current HR girls, HR interns, and our staff and volunteers. Here we share a few stories from HR alums.



Meike S. (Class of 2003) graduated from Berea College in 2007. She shares her experience from the summer after graduating, when she brought a piece of High Rocks to a small classroom in Haiti.

Dear High Rocks,

Here I am in Haiti, a hot, dirty, crowded and poor place teaching English, a job I have never been trained to do, and making a lot of it up as I go. There is not much in terms of a curriculum or materials to create with so my imagination, the magazines, and few books become the basis for discussions, homework assignments, and grammar lessons. In this place I feel forsaken by so many familiar things and people; communication has been very limited and it is simply a different reality here. I've lost some of the freedoms that I take for granted and that are so important to me in my life at home—like being able to go places alone, decide what I eat, etc. Meals are prepared for me and I cannot leave the house without someone accompanying me at all times.

I'm handling about 50 students instead of the original planned-for 20. They are mainly males older than I and all of them are as black as I am white. Yet, somehow we have found a connection through what we are studying and through mutual interest and desire to understand and be understood by each other. We deal with some of the world and life's biggest questions in class and have some of the most profound discoveries about each other and ourselves as well as some of the most heart-felt laughs that we have ever known. They have become my friends as well as my students and we all appreciate it.

I'm telling you all of this because both directly and indirectly High Rocks has helped prepare me to do this and given me tools in order to pull through it: be it the idea of making a lot of things up as you go to the songs we are singing (Lean on Me and Trouble in Mind) to the way that High Rocks always seems to get to the heart of an issue. I have received many gifts from you. I have learned assertiveness and to act like I'm confident and know exactly what I want when the situation demands it even if I'm feeling terribly intimidated on the inside. Basically I've learned to jump right in and trust that I will do my best and make the best of whatever I'm doing. I've learned to laugh, to be patient, and to make connections with different kinds of people.

Being in Haiti to teach showed me the wonderful nature of the people who are so friendly, family-oriented, and helpful, and most are so eager to learn (quite the contrast from the education system as a whole in this country where students can't wait to leave class—in Haiti mine would stay as long as I let them). For some of them this was a whole new reality; something new and exciting, and their chance for hope and growth. It was an honor for many of them to have this chance and for some it may be the first time that they truly saw themselves as becoming someone important and capable of doing something good in their futures. It was very special and very rewarding to be able to watch and help these students grow. Some aspects of the country are dirty and difficult to adjust to, but overall I was able to step out of my usual role and ideas and take on the role as teacher of a large class of diverse students and learn about a new way of life by being immersed in it.

I am grateful for so many things. I'm grateful for my faults, my challenges, my past, and all my teachers. I'm grateful for the hard times though which many of you have been my steady moorings in a churning well of emotions and confusion. I'm grateful for the times you have been honest and exposed some of my hidden hang-ups—after you made me face them, I had no choice but to deal with them. I grew up a little more each time.

So, while I'm here eating sardines for breakfast, spicy peanut butter for lunch and fresh mangoes for dinner and teaching a room full of tall ebony-colored men who bow in front of me about global warming (in English), legendary leaders like Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, Jr., and how to pronounce “throughout”, I'm thinking of you. And, I want you to know that a piece of High Rocks is going to stay in a small classroom upstairs in a downtown house in a small city in Haiti and in the hearts of some more youth who are driven and passionate about changing the world. You have shaped my values and nurtured my life and I was able to pass a little bit of that along. I love all of you!

Love,
Meike

Valarie M. (Class of 2001) writes about the difference High Rocks has made in her life, her relationships, and her confidence in the future. Valarie is now a Physician's Assistant in a practice in Marlinton, WV. She is a High Rocks board member.

I started the High Rocks Academy in the summer of '97 when I was fourteen years old and preparing to go to high school the next school year. Like most girls my age, I was bored with my life, I wanted to grow up fast, I did not get along with my parents as well as I should have, and I was beginning to experiment and get myself into trouble. I knew nothing about the camp prior to going except that some of my friends told me it was a "Nerd Camp" which made me apprehensive about going. The day before camp was starting, I asked my mom if I had to go and she responded very wisely saying that I did not have to go but that she thought that I would really like the experience. Fortunately I did choose to participate in the "First Year" camp in the second year of the program's existence.

At first I thought that it would just be a summer camp that I would attend once, like most other summer camps I had attended previously. I was wrong-very wrong. Over the next four years while I was in high school, I participated in tutoring, weekend retreats, alumni camps, SAT/ACT preparation, College trips/tours and many other activities sponsored by High Rocks. Besides help with school work, I was also provided with an environment where I could spend time with many of my friends, also involved in the program, that was free of the pressures of a normal, teenage life. We got to know each other based on our personalities instead of how we dressed, or who we partied with, etc. Even better than that I was provided with a network of adult mentors, who truly were my friends that I could talk to about certain issues that I didn't feel comfortable talking to with my mom and dad.

They did not replace my mom and dad but actually encouraged a better relationship between my parents and I. They would listen to me, respect me, and guide me to make good decisions. Even though there were many more girls than adults, I still felt a very close relationship with all of them. The amount of time that they had to invest in order to establish this personal, warm relationship with each and every girl is unbelievable.

After being in the program, I began to understand the importance of many things that I might not have otherwise. I took more care in deciding a path for my future and what college I would attend. As I mentioned earlier, my relationship with my parents, especially with my mom, improved. I still made many bad decisions, as we all have and will in life, but I was better able to deal with the consequences of those decisions. I knew that no matter what happened to me, I would always have High Rocks and that was very important to me in the unsteady years of high school and even now in my second year in college.

Kayla R. (Class of 2007), High Rocks alum, talks about her personal transformation at High Rocks and how it helped her make the transition to college.

Wow, what can I say. I have grown a lot over the years, and over the years there have been very few things that have been consistent. My family and a few friends yes, but High Rocks has been there since I was 14 years old and in my second year of 7th grade. Bad grades, low self-esteem, and a selfish attitude; I was introduced to High Rocks by my truancy officer and did not want to be involved in any kind of all girls camp, ever. My mother thought it was an amazing idea at the time, so of course I hated it from the start. I felt as if I was being punished by being sent there and had no idea what was truly in store for me that summer as I hauled my plastic tupperware tote into the back of my paw-paw's truck.

I made changes in myself that summer that I could not believe, and neither could my mother. I was happier, and more confident than ever, and I also learned that being myself is all I needed to do to make friends. Throughout the years my high rocks sisters have kept me grounded and sane.

I never thought I would go to college either. I always wanted to, but for the longest time I did not even think I was going to graduate high school. But with the tutoring for school every week and the support that I got from the staff members, I pulled through. They helped me study for my ACT's and apply to different colleges. They also got together college trips for us to go on so we could see all the different choices we have out there. I am in college right now and without the strong foundation that High Rocks has given me I would not have made it through my first semester. Community Thursdays helped us to change the world, and in doing so I have come to college with a more open, outspoken mind.

Everyday I wake up and start my day with breakfast and the news. I have some of the greatest friends a girl could ask for. I go to a small college (Potomac State College of

WVU) in a small town (Keyser) much like back home. If it had not been for High Rocks I would have probably made the wrong decisions and went straight to Morgantown and probably failed out. I plan on getting a degree in Criminal Justice Studies and then continuing on to get a degree in Homicide Investigations. I am planning on being in the CIA or the FBI at one point in my life.

I have been through some wild things in my life and made some crazy choices. High Rocks has supported and loved me no matter how badly I messed up.

Which is kind of ironic because you do not normally find girls supporting each other these days, but these girls do, and I do not know what I would do without them in my life.