



Experiencing Silence Among the Stones

by Matthew Nelson

On February 16, 2017, nine students from City High School left the chilly city streets for the warm desert west of town. The destination for the day was Cocoraque Butte within the Ironwood Forest National Monument. The first stop along the way was at Gates Pass overlook – the natural gap in the Tucson Mountains with perfect views of Avra Valley to the west and the Tucson Basin to the west. After the group got to know each other a little better and shared what they were most looking forward to about the day (which included everything from getting out of the city to learning more about local anthropology), we practiced some basic orienteering skills by using the sun and moon as cardinal direction indicators. I talked briefly about how iron within our blood is magnetically charged to align to the north, just like the needle of a compass, and how every one of us should be able to feel which way is north. This skill would later be practiced out in the desert, far from the giant stone compass embedded in the sidewalk at Gates Pass.

After bouncing down a rutted dirt road toward the distant hills, students poured out of the van and hiked along an arroyo for a short distance before I stopped them to talk about the importance of the Leave No Trace ethic of “leave what you find.” Since each artifact is a puzzle piece of history and removing a single piece makes the big picture incomplete, I reinforced the importance of respecting history and future generations by admiring artifacts but never removing them from their context. Students walked delicately through the cholla and ironwood trees and before long the ground seem to shimmer with potsherds, both plain ware and decorated ceramics.



The pile of dark boulders to the west us seemed to magnetically draw the students into its orbit, and without even instructing them on our destination they arrived at the base of Cocoraque Butte. We talked about how to enjoy the ancient rock art (petroglyphs) that covered the hill, and make sure our visit didn't have a negative impact on this important cultural resource. Some students sped to the top of the hill to see the view while others crept slowly up through the rocks in search of symbols and mesmerizing images.



After soaking up the silence of the desert and identifying some mountain ranges, students were asked to use their notebooks to record the detail of one petroglyph they felt a particular connection to. After they had completed the process of sketching the ancient image into their notebook, they were asked to write a story about this image, what it meant, who carved it, and why it was here.

The next 30 to 40 minutes was almost pure silence as students and teachers immersed themselves in the experience. They sat quietly

among the warm rocks and let their intuition and imagination take them thousands of years back in time.



After the exercise, everyone gathered around to tell their stories. One of the questions left with each student was, "What will you leave behind as your legacy?"

The trip back home came all too soon, but the relaxed pace of the day in a culturally significant location left each student with a greater sense of appreciation for where they live and their role as stewards of special places like Cocoraque Butte.



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