

**“These programs change lives.  
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self-confidence.”**

—JESSE CHAKRIN  
National Park Service Ranger

# Q&A

WITH A  
YOSEMITE  
INSIDER



**N**ational Park Service Rangers Jesse Chakrin and Shauna Potocky inspire young people in Yosemite — many of whom have never known the wonders of a national park — through Youth in Yosemite Programs funded in part by Yosemite Conservancy. They use the magic of Yosemite to expose youth to new ideas, environments and ways of living. In the process, new generations of environmental stewards are born and youth of all ages come into their own.

**How did you become involved with park youth programs?**

**SHAUNA ::** Previous to my career with the National Park Service, I worked at the University of California, Santa Cruz Seymour Marine Discovery Center at Long Marine Laboratory. The vast majority of my career has been in either formal or informal education. When the Branch Chief of Education position opened for Yosemite, it was a dream job opportunity—and the only job that would be able to take me away from Santa Cruz.

**JESSE ::** I had been working as a Wilderness Ranger for several years, and wanted to do something to address what I saw as an inequity in access to wild areas. Spending time in truly wild places has universal benefits, but I rarely saw diverse and underserved youth using those places with any frequency. Working with Mandy Vance and the

WildLink program [WildLink gives high school students their first chance to spend time in Yosemite’s wilderness during a week-long expedition in the park], we envisioned an opportunity for WildLink Alumni to continue their connections to parks and wild places. With the support of the Conservancy, we created a two-week orientation to living and working in a national park that is going into its 6th year of existence.

**What do you like best about your work?**

**JESSE ::** I love to help create opportunities for youth to grow and develop through their interactions with the natural world. Because we deliver intensive, multi-year programming, it allows me to see our participants develop as people, students, leaders and stewards of our parks and wild places. Changing lives does not happen overnight. People can have powerful experiences, but if there is not an intentional pathway that links programs for youth development, like we have here, those experiences become discrete memories, not new lifestyles.

**SHAUNA ::** When you see a student learn something that is transformative, there’s nothing like it. I love sharing knowledge that allows youth to gain a better understanding or expansion of one’s worldview. Helping them to see the connections or the depth of dynamics in our world as well as their part in it is palpable. I love helping to build new opportunities



**TOP LEFT** Park Ranger Shauna Potocky with Yosemite Leadership Program (YLP) interns in the Yosemite Wilderness Center. **TOP RIGHT** Park Ranger Jesse Chakrin with Youth in Yosemite participants.

for youth and programs in the park. Since arriving here, I have learned how to establish new connections and broaden the reach of Yosemite to underserved youth—taking initial conversations and moving into established partnerships, then running those programs and seeing the youth participants in the park is amazing. Two examples are a photography program called Parks In Focus and another called Gateway Expressions Student Art and Poetry Contest.

#### What makes Yosemite's youth programs unique?

**SHAUNA ::** Yosemite is the ultimate classroom. You can teach nearly every subject here as well as connect youth to leadership development and careers in a variety of fields and organizations. Educators in Yosemite are by far the most passionate I have worked with. Yosemite also has an incredible reach, serving and connecting with students locally and internationally. It is true that Yosemite inspires the world!

**JESSE ::** The most unique aspect of Yosemite's Youth programs is the intentional cross-peer connections that are fostered by managers. This does two things for participants. First, it allows younger participants to have older role models as mentors that they can relate to. For example Yosemite Leadership Program (YLP) students can mentor Adventure Risk Challenge (ARC) participants. [YLP partners National Park Service employees with University of California, Merced students to teach stewardship and leadership skills during academic year programs and summer internships. ARC is a 40-day summer immersion program that uses the wilderness experience to improve academic, literacy and other skills.] Second, this linkage creates pathways between programs so that participants have intentional

next steps laid out before them, and can continue their relationships with each other, parks, wild places and the environment.

#### How do these programs make a difference for youth?

**JESSE ::** These programs change lives. Participants get opportunities to live and work in Yosemite, and through these opportunities, they see themselves and the world differently. Many find peace and self-confidence. Other participants find a passion that focuses their academic career, inspiring them to go to college or helping them to decide on a major. For example, one participant named Johnny in the Yosemite Leadership Program started as a shy underclassman and now has the confidence to run retreats to Wawona for the University of California, Merced Hmong Student Association. This linking of Yosemite to community embodies the ideas of stewardship that we hope to instill in our participants. Johnny not only brought his community to Yosemite, but also brought Yosemite to his community. His academic interests are a perfect intersection of his passions. He hopes to work in addressing health disparities found in underserved communities in California's Central Valley, and one of the tools he hopes to use are the amazing resources of public land in the Sierra Nevada, especially Yosemite.

**SHAUNA ::** Youth who need to be challenged are given an opportunity to see their potential. With programs like Adventure Risk Challenge, for example, the transformation for participants is undeniable. It changes lives and many students emerge empowered to achieve their potential. For middle school youth who participate in Parks In Focus programs, many have never had the opportunity to recreate in community parks let alone a



national park. Connecting youth to the magic of Yosemite touches their lives by creating connections that inspire them to learn the value of public lands as a legacy. It inspires them to care for the park, become stewards and create a desire to come back.

*What impact do youth programs have on park habitat and visitor experience?*

**SHAUNA ::** If you have hiked in the park—you have benefitted from their efforts. The youth who participate in these programs learn valuable skills and create a legacy for the park and park visitors that will last long after their season has finished. Youth Conservation Corps and the California Conservation Corps programs, for example, preserve park habitat and maintain infrastructure.

**JESSE ::** Youth programs are consistently involved in the hands-on protection of Yosemite. Participants in programs with the Youth Conservation Corps, California Conservation Corps and Yosemite Leadership Program learn by doing trail work, education, restoration and physical science. These types of experiential programs allow youth to engage with their environments, both mentally and physically, to form very deep bonds with the park. Many participants also represent the diversity of California and are able to provide education and interpretation in a visitor's native language, a tremendously welcoming experience.

*How would you describe the Conservancy's impact on youth programs?*

**JESSE ::** Many of these programs simply would not exist without the Conservancy. In this time of shrinking federal and state budgets, the support is critical. It is crucial to have a partner that is willing to support the ideas and programs that will carry us into the rapidly changing 21st century. The Conservancy allows us to look beyond what we need to do to protect parks, and realize what we dream to do for this incredible place we call Yosemite.

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**BOTTOM** Park Ranger Shauna Potocky with ARC (Adventure Risk Challenge) students.



**SHAUNA ::** The park would lose its ability to connect youth to the legacy of Yosemite and to foster the passion it takes to love and care for this special place. Because of the support we have, youth are learning about natural environments and emerging with pathways into public lands careers or associated fields of interest.

What is your favorite memory from working with young people?

**JESSE ::** One of my favorite memories is from an interaction with a young Hmong woman named Bee. She was on a hike to the top of Mount Hoffmann and the conditions were cold and blustery. We spent time at the top. All of the participants were relatively quiet, taking it all in. On the way down, I asked how people were feeling and if they thought they would come back to this place. Bee became incredibly excited and professed that she would. In fact, she wanted to go back to the top right then. At first I thought that she was joking, but in fact she was totally serious. A few months later, Bee became a Yosemite Leadership Program intern.

**SHAUNA ::** I love watching participants grow. It's remarkable to share in someone's growth, to watch them go beyond the learning you have shared with them and to see them making a difference in their community, for the people and environment around them. Then, having them return to Yosemite and having an impact right here for the next cohort of students is amazing. There are no words for it and it is what I live for. ■



Support Youth in Yosemite Projects by becoming a Yosemite Conservancy member.

Make a gift today that will preserve and protect Yosemite for today and for future generations. Click [here](#) to make your gift.



**TOP** SCA crews remove inappropriate campsites and restore wilderness areas to retain a natural appearance.

## Youth in Yosemite: Empowering the Next Generation of Yosemite Stewards

When asked how to describe their experiences in Yosemite, many youth say 'life-changing' or the 'best experience of my life'. Youth in Yosemite opens up a whole new world—their first trip to the park, their first hike or campsite, and many new educational, career and life choices.

Youth participate in projects ranging from trail repair to wilderness restoration. By participating in comprehensive educational programs they leave with many new skills like leadership, literacy and community service.

Look for the Youth in Yosemite emblem on our website to find 2012 Youth in Yosemite designated projects!

Click [here](#) for the full list of 2012 Youth in Yosemite projects.

