

Guiding Has Been a Positive Influence in My Life

By Tanya Reimer

It is difficult to imagine what a Girl Guide looks like long after she has left her uniform behind. It is difficult to picture a Girl Guide without her blue uniform, without her badges proudly displayed, and without her cookies. As with all things of childhood, these things fade away. Yet the substantive quality of Guiding remains with a girl as she grows into a woman. I say this almost ten years after I have actively participated in Guiding because I think that Guiding has been an incredible force in my development. If you can imagine me, you can picture a Girl Guide who no longer collects badges because the lessons that they represent have been intimately stitched into her being.

One may be able to tell by looking at my resume – a two page summary of where I've been and what I've done. At quick glance, one can tell I am an avid traveler. My jobs and experiences listed have taken me from Victoria to Chicoutimi, Ottawa, London, Montreal, New York and Geneva. These places have made me many different people: a nanny, a student of languages and art, a conference delegate, and a public servant. My resume will also tell you that I use computer software, speak French and write research documents. Although it conveys a lot of information about the skills I bring to a job, it says very little about how I became these things – how I came to seek out opportunities with the courage to take risks and attempt what seems impossible.

Like others Girl Guides, I did crafts, went camping, and played truth or dare. I was a Gnome in my Brownie Unit. My mother helped with the annual cookie sales. As a Guide, I attended camps. As a Pathfinder, I attended Our Cabana in Mexico City. I was fifteen years old in 1996 when I went to Mexico. All the girls from that trip with whom I have kept in contact travel extensively.

While at Our Cabana, we did a refugee simulation one day. We were organized into families and, to represent few belongings, we were told we could bring one thing each. To reproduce the feeling of helplessness, we had to line up for a long time in the hot sun at a mock border where we were yelled at in a foreign language. We knew it wasn't real, but the longer we waited the more it felt real. Once past the border, we were in a field with a few tarps that we could erect for shelters. There weren't enough for everyone and, once erected, there was nothing to do but sit and wait. When supper time came, we were provided with a rudimentary stove and some foreign and unappetizing food. By the end of the simulation, I remember thinking how useless the item I brought had been. My choice to bring it underlined my incomprehension of the reality of refugees.

I think of this experience often in my university studies of politics and power. But Guiding informed more than just my career path and travel interests, though the lines are not as easy to connect. It is difficult to articulate all the ways in which Guiding has made me the person I am. I won't attempt such a task. Nevertheless, I believe it equipped me with all the tools that I needed to become who I am.

When I fill out a job application or scholarship form today, I remember using the same skills when I applied for camps and camp funding. When I challenge authorities, I remember being a troublemaker in a safe place where I could explore the limits of possibility. I have courage and self-esteem because of camps with outhouses that were scary even during the day, but I survived. Both my victories and failures built up a strength and character of spirit in me because, pass or fail, I was in a safe place, surrounded by peers. I had the freedom to explore and make mistakes.

As much as Guiding was good for me, it always reminded me that it wasn't all about me. It was about the environment that could be harmed, the community around us to which we were responsible, and those more needy than ourselves. A few months ago I heard Margaret Atwood telling Sheila Rogers on CBC Radio that it is the Girl Guide in her that makes it impossible for her to say no when people ask for help. Upon hearing this, I smiled for although I have grown up, I have not grown out of being prepared, helping others and exploring the world around me. The same curiosity I was encouraged to act on in Guiding is with me still.

Recommended reading: To understand the lives of contemporary young women, I suggest the book *Reviving Ophelia* by Mary Pipher, PhD.