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Aside from outdoor exploration, one of the goals of the organization's Outdoor Career Academy—a program aimed at young adults—is to promote opportunities for youth in urban areas to learn about career prospects in the outdoor industry, where employers may not often consider recruiting talent. “Throughout my two years of college, I don't think my professors ever talked about what goes on behind the textbooks,” says Chu Xiong—an Outdoor Career Academy graduate and

current employee of WI. “The program taught us about leadership, adaptability, teamwork, and integrity, all of which I still use today.”

For young adults like Xiong who would otherwise have little connection with the wilderness, the Outdoor Career Academy provides a chance to learn about basic outdoor safety and conservation through activities like team building and visualize employment opportunities in the field—something

Xiong says is invaluable. WI has even partnered with local REI stores, the National Park Service, and many others to place individuals in real-world positions after they have moved through the academy.

A LESSON IN DIVERSITY

Inclusivity and diversity are at the heart of Wilderness Inquiry, and it's not a difficult concept to put into practice. Bringing groups of people together who you wouldn't expect to interact and

watching meaningful relationships form is one of the most exciting parts of a WI trip, Lais says, and one of the most rewarding aspects of his position as a founder.

As the organization celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2018, Lais reflected on what he's learned from the hundreds of trips he's made with WI and the thousands of people that have benefited from its mission. “The wilderness is a level playing field

because Mother Nature doesn't really care about you,” he admits. “You learn pretty quickly that you have to depend on each other, and I think that's one of the unspoken but profound things that happens on these trips. We discovered that a disability doesn't really matter. It's about a person's attitude, willingness to be there, and participation. The way we come together as human beings—that's what counts.”

For more info, visit wildernessinquiry.org