



San Joaquin River
Parkway and
Conservation Trust, Inc.

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Dear Friend,

“I think I’m most excited about going home,”
Alma sullenly shared as she stepped off the bus.

Alma’s first camping trip had a rocky beginning. Brand new to the River Parkway Trust’s Voyagers VISTAS program, she felt apprehensive because she didn’t know any of the other participants. And the long and winding bus ride to the campsite at Mono Creek Campground made her carsick.

The group gathered for introductions since there were new faces from the previous VISTAS trip, including Alma. The Trust’s High School Programs Manager, Carina, provided instructions on setting up the campsite and passed out gear.

As the group set up their tents and rolled out their sleeping bags, Alma stayed mainly to herself. During the free time that followed, she quietly explored the area and walked along the trail to Mono Creek, taking in the forest’s sights, sounds, and smells.

“I can help with the burgers,” Alma offered quietly as the group split into teams for dinner prep. The campsite buzzed with activity as everyone chopped, prepped, and cooked. Alma felt a sense of well-being as she flipped the sizzling patties on the camp stove. She was starting to feel more at home in the outdoor setting with her peers, her confidence growing with each turn of the spatula.

The sun began to set, painting the forest in golden light. Alma and a few other program participants set out to gather kindling material to start the campfire. Alma was transfixed, watching the flames dance in the fire ring. *Maybe I’m excited about being out here, she thought.*



Magali, a Youth Parkway Ambassador alumna and current Trust staff member, pulled up her chair and settled in next to Alma. Under a sky blanketed with stars, the two sat together, their conversation unfolding in the peaceful glow of the night. S'mores, hot chocolate, and campfire stories rounded out the evening.

As the program staff settled in for the night, the joyful laughter and chatter of the VISTAS youth echoed through the campsite.

YOU helped make Alma's experience possible!

That's why I'm writing to you today – to share how your generosity makes a difference in the lives of local youth, providing them with opportunities to learn about the San Joaquin River watershed from the Sierras to the Sea.

Will you partner with the Trust to help connect even more young people to the natural wonders of the San Joaquin River with a donation of \$35, \$50, or more?

Because supporting outdoor experiences for youth means investing in the future protection of the San Joaquin River Parkway. These hands-on learning opportunities cultivate a deep appreciation for and understanding of the natural world, inspiring young people to become lifelong advocates for preserving the places where their memories were made.

The following morning, after breakfast, the group embarked on a guided nature hike. As they trekked along the trail, they discovered how Mono Creek flows into the South Fork of the San Joaquin River and the origins of the San Joaquin's Middle Fork at Banner Peak and Thousand Island Lake. The day before, during the bus ride to the campground, the youth had glimpsed the scars of the Creek Fire. While hiking, they gained insights into the ecological impacts of wildfires, deepening their understanding of the landscape around them.

Although the beginning of Alma's first camping trip felt challenging and scary, she found peace in the beauty of the forest and creek. She left the experience with newfound self-confidence and a desire to expand her connection to nature.

Several days later, the VISTAS group gathered for their next adventure. This time, they would paddle colorful Corcls – round boats designed for children and youth – on a journey from Sumner Peck Ranch to Owl Hollow. These unique boats present various paddling challenges, particularly in riffles that can spin them around, adding an element of excitement to their experience on the water.

Paddling a Corcl marked Alma's first experience on the river, and she relished in the stillness of being on the water. During this trip, she began to share more of herself with fellow VISTAS participant Peter. As they chatted, they discovered that they both attended the same high school but had never connected with each other on campus. Developing this friendship contributed to Alma's continued transformation through the VISTAS program.

By this point in the program, the group had become more cohesive, developing trust in one another and in themselves as they navigated new experiences in the outdoor environment. This growing confidence and sense of belonging lay the foundation for a more significant connection to the river, inspiring a sense of responsibility and commitment to protecting the Parkway for future generations.

In the lead-up to the second camping trip, Alma felt excited about the adventures ahead. She looked forward to experiencing a new environment and learning about how the San Joaquin River connects to San Pablo Bay and, eventually, the Pacific Ocean. Alma and Peter excitedly stepped off the bus and began exploring the China Camp State Park campground.

After setting up their campsite, the group embarked on a kayaking adventure on the bay. It was Alma's first time kayaking, and with each stroke of her paddle, she felt more at ease on the water and herself. Later that day, Carina introduced the capstone project each VISTAS participant would develop as a culmination of their program experience. To spark their creativity, the youth engaged in a practice project where they crafted scenes using only natural materials found around them, each piece reflecting their personal journey in the program.

Carina was filled with an immense sense of joy and gratitude as she watched Alma bring her experiences to life, creating a scene that captured the moments that impacted her most: kayaking and sitting by the campfire. Alma's scene depicted San Pablo Bay, using a leaf to symbolize the kayak and ash to represent her feelings about her first campfire.

Later that evening, as the group settled into the relaxed pace of the evening, they were delighted to spot deer grazing nearby and raccoons scurrying up a tree in the campsite. These unexpected encounters with wildlife added another layer of wonder to their outdoor experience, enriching their appreciation for the natural world around them.

Your support is crucial in providing programs like VISTAS, which empowers the next generation to become stewards of the Parkway. By fostering hands-on experiences in the San Joaquin River watershed, you are helping young people connect with and appreciate the land and river while understanding the importance of conservation.

A donation of \$35, \$50 or more is an investment in the growth and education of these future leaders, which means preserving the Parkway for generations to come. Will you make a special donation today?

Learning about Alma's experience caused me to reflect on my own connection to the San Joaquin River watershed. Last June, I backpacked to the headwaters of the middle fork of the San Joaquin River at Thousand Island Lake. It was my first backpacking trip, and like Alma, I experienced some challenges. There was slippery snow on the trail that resulted in a fall that cut and bruised my knee, an unexpected bout of illness, and a far-too-heavy pack – a typical beginner's error. Despite the challenges, I was exalted by the wilderness experience. I find time in the outdoors to be critical for my mental and physical health, and I came back more inspired and committed to the River Parkway Trust's work.

Work that begins with land conservation, recognizing our collective duty to create and protect the Parkway for future generations. Will they be prepared to care for the San Joaquin River Parkway when their time comes?

Alma's journey of transformation fills me with hope for the future. She shifted from longing to go home to feeling that the outdoors and natural world of the San Joaquin River truly felt like home.

I am confident that the next generation will be prepared to take on the challenges ahead, especially with your generous support.

Will you join us in nurturing these future leaders of the Parkway with a special donation of \$35, \$50, or an amount that reflects the value you see in the Parkway? Your support today will help protect and steward the places where young people can develop a connection to natural places and each other.

Thank you for supporting the River Parkway Trust's land conservation work and outdoor programs. I am incredibly grateful for your partnership in creating and protecting the San Joaquin River Parkway.

In the spirit of outdoor adventures,



Sharon J. Weaver
Executive Director

P.S. Your generous donation will help fund programs and projects that empower young people like Alma to cultivate a strong sense of connection to the San Joaquin River.