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ADAPTIVE HOSTS THE EXPEDITION SCHOOL IN NEW KELSEY WRIGHT BUILDING

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"This was one of the best weeks we've ever had"

By Kendra Walker

Adaptive Sports Center's new Kelsey Wright building, which up until a month ago was bustling with hard hats, construction and furniture assembly, is now bustling with climbing helmets, guides and visiting adaptive guests. Adaptive's new sanctuary is finally ready to serve its purpose.

Since the building's July 2 grand opening, ASC has hosted three groups this summer, including The Expedition School from Austin, Texas last week.

The Expedition School, which specifically services the blind and visually impaired, has been working with ASC since 2016. The group visits Crested Butte twice a year for winter and summer programs. This August trip marked the eighth visit for the group, which included five 19- to 20-year-old blind and visually impaired students and three Expedition School guides.

"It's been such a game changer for our students," said The Expedition School's founder and executive director Kimery Duda, on their collaboration with ASC. "Some of them have been with the program since the start and the sheer humble experience through rock climbing, skiing, mountain biking and ice climbing has just been so powerful for each student. It's been incredible to see such a sustainable opportunity for the students to work on their skills in Austin and to come to the next level here in the mountains."

Duda explained how the students are taught to compare the outdoor recreational challenges they experience in Crested Butte to their everyday life challenges. "We're able to facilitate and identify those new challenges in the work that we do with Adaptive Sports Center in the outdoor arena, and we talk about those challenges and how we can take them back into reality. It's just poetry to see them accomplish new goals and to grow and mature into their own and have such a supportive network of educators and guides with the Adaptive Sports Center," said Duda.

On staying in the new building, Duda said her students are "so tickled and privileged and honored. They're so respectful and so appreciative of all the work that's gone into it."

In the past, The Expedition School stayed in a different location each time they visited Crested Butte. Duda said, "Each time the students have to adapt to that specific lodging situation. To now have the Kelsey Wright building, the students appreciated it so much more because they've had such a great perspective of not being right there at the base of the mountain. I love that for them they've really had to learn to adapt and appreciate this new building and its location and all of Adaptive's amenities.

"To take an elevator, they've never had the privilege. To be so close to the bus line to get into the town of Crested Butte. They're not as rushed and they're just over the moon with the new building," Duda said.

One of The Expedition School's students, 20-year-old Jordan Main, has been with the program since it started in 2016. "I've been to Crested Butte about eight times now, two winter trips and at least six summer trips. I love getting out there, skiing and being outdoors and all the summer activities," he said.

Main enjoyed staying in the new Kelsey Wright building. "The whole place was very easy to get to, and very easy access to the mountain" he said. "It was a great location; we'd walk out, go 100 feet and there's a bus stop to go downtown. We really liked the easy access with keypads and everything seems extremely accessible. There were lots of different areas to hang out in the building. I like how it's really purposefully built."

Main's favorite features of the new building included the "very comfortable beds" and "the fanciest toilet I've ever seen."

During their stay, the students participated in hiking activities, rock climbing, camping, horseback riding and mountain biking. Biking was a hit. "They all didn't want to stop biking even though it was pouring down rain," laughed Duda. "We biked around town, we biked to the Farmers Market, we biked everywhere. Dreams came true this trip because three of my students had never ridden stand-up bikes by themselves before. Which was incredible to witness because, one, they're riding by themselves for the first time; two, they're blind; and three, they're going on an epic bike ride."

Main had ridden a stand-up bicycle by himself only once before, five years ago, and had the opportunity to hop on again during this trip. "That was amazing to get back and do that," he said. "It feels as close to flying as possible."

Horseback riding was also a memorable experience. "The connection between our visually impaired students and the horses was just magical because the horses can't tell they're blind," said Duda. "That's actually a superpower for them."

Another highlight of the trip included camping near Hartman Rocks, despite threatening thunderstorms. "It started raining really hard and it was really hectic setting up camp—that was a new experience," Main recalled. "But we all voted to stay there and it was a great decision because it stopped raining and it was a beautiful night. That was a really big moment for me sitting there by the fire and talking about the day and general life and blindness."

The Expedition School will have the opportunity to test out the new Kelsey Wright building in the winter when they reunite with ASC and Crested Butte in January 2020. "These students already have it on their calendar," said Duda. "It's wonderful to have that retention of committed students."

Duda stressed how powerful and transformative it's been to watch her students' progress each time they visit Crested Butte. "There's an incredible symbiotic relationship between Adaptive and the students because they're so thankful for every opportunity that they have. They know this is a very special trip—not only because of the sanctuary of the outdoors they're visiting, but also the incredible mentorship from Adaptive. They're around such wonderful mentors doing what they love and it's contagious. I can't speak highly enough of them and we're so incredibly humbled and honored to be a part of the community of Crested Butte and so lucky to have their love and support. This was one of the best weeks we've ever had."

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