



Photo submitted by Sean Nicholson

Senior Sean Nicholson takes a break from his hike to pose for a selfie. He spent 73 days in a wilderness therapy program in the mountains of North Carolina.

# Nicholson nurtures recovery through wilderness therapy

By Arabella Saunders  
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The boys gather around their makeshift campfire, their clothes still damp with rain water, boots caked with the mud of the Pisgah National Forest. Juxtaposed against the sharp crack of the flames, the wind whispers through pine trees as they hang their heads in exhaustion. The voice of their field supervisor breaks the silence: “Think about a time you’ve lost someone because of your actions and tell a story about what you did to lose them,” he challenges. Countless scenarios begin to manifest in senior Sean Nicholson’s mind as each boy takes his turn.

“That was the first time I felt emotionally safe somewhere,” Nicholson recalled. “We went around and all the instructors and all the students talked about the people they’ve lost because of who they were. Every dude that night cried. We had a Kumbaya at the end of the night.”

Throughout his 73-day journey with SUWS of the Carolinas – a wilderness therapy program tailored to teens struggling with substance abuse and/or mental illness – nights such as these were frequent for Nicholson. With his depression

becoming increasingly severe, the program was a “last-ditch effort” for Nicholson and his family.

“It’s just been depression for the longest time,” Nicholson said. “I just coped with it by pretty much covering it up; hanging out with friends, listening to music, avoiding my problems instead of facing them head on.”

Prior to attending the School of Urban and Wilderness Survival in Old Fort just outside of Asheville, Nicholson resorted to therapy, prescription pills and hospital stays in an attempt to manage his depression. Last January, he was unwillingly admitted to the hospital for mental illness rehabilitation.

“It was very controlled, the most controlled environment I’ve ever been in,” Nicholson said. “They kind of repress your feelings, tell you they’re not normal and then they kind of dope you up and tell you, ‘This is what normalcy is.’”

After returning home from that involuntary admittance, Nicholson’s depression grew worse. He began acting out more. Failing classes.

“It’s all like a blur or some downhill spiral of me doing some more unhealthy stuff and coming more inward into myself and pushing people away,” he said.

At that point, Nicholson’s parents began researching alternative forms of therapy.

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– Sean Nicholson

“I was like, ‘Eh, I don’t know if I want to commit to that.’ That’s leaving behind everything I was comfortable with – summer job, technology, friends, coffee,” Nicholson said. “It was a really big commitment, so I left it up to them to decide.”

On May 12, weeks after that initial conversation, Nicholson learned he would be leaving the Outer Banks for the Pisgah National Forest in two days. He packed his bag, which consisted of underwear and socks, and departed on schedule.

As the family made its way up the winding gravel roads of Black Mountain, Nicholson began to

reconsider his agreement.

“You get there, you see a bunch of dingy-looking buildings and they’re old cabin-type things,” he said.

“That’s when I kind of wanted to back out because it’s like, ‘I don’t wanna live here, I don’t wanna live here, I don’t wanna live here.’”

Despite his initial hesitation, Nicholson settled into his first night at SUWS’ headquarters and received his minimalistic supplies – field clothes and a backpack containing a single tin cup and a spoon. Two days later, after being assigned to group Bravo and briefed on the program’s mission as well as its rules, Nicholson departed into the field with optimism.

“My original goal day one, I told everybody ‘I’ll be out of here in 25 days, I’m not gonna work this program, I’m gonna own this program,’” Nicholson said.

The next 25 days were spent hiking, learning survival skills like setting traps, and settling into life off the grid.

Interspersed between hiking and skill development were periods of self-reflection and community discussions known as Truth Circles, where the boys gathered in a group and took turns voicing their thoughts on a chosen topic.

“You’re airing it out and people

are there to support you through it,” Nicholson recalled. “We did bumps at the end when we all put our fists together and said, ‘It works if you work it and you’re worth it so work it.’ It’s a nice little motivation thing.”

As the group hiked from campsite to campsite, Nicholson realized he had learned so much about himself that his self-imposed deadline was overly optimistic.

“Twenty-five days came and I still had a lot to learn. I was becoming aware of who I was and realized, ‘I can’t do this in 25 days,’” he said. “So, I set my goal for 50 days.”

Nicholson continued with the program as others in his group began to graduate. But he, too, would soon be moving on. Nicholson never felt quite right in Bravo group because most of the other boys were dealing with anger management issues, not depression – “It wasn’t a good match for me emotionally,” he said.

Due to his progression and length of time within the program, Nicholson was approached by a field supervisor and given the opportunity to co-lead a newly revived group known as Alpha.

“It had been shut down for years and then they started it up again, and I got to be the one to design the group culture,” he said. “They give you an empty notebook and you write what the group is gonna be about in it, who’s in it, what rules you’re gonna live by and all that stuff.”

Nicholson filled the notebook with an outline for his new group based on collectiveness, calling on “The Law of the Jungle” from “The Jungle Book” for inspiration.

“We worked together as a wolfpack. We were a group about not only accepting each other, but helping each other become stronger and get through the struggles of the day,” Nicholson said. “Sometimes, even if you don’t want to, someone would struggle with carrying their pack and you would take the extra 40 pounds and strap it onto your chest.”

In addition to teamwork, Nicholson also aimed for Alpha to be centered around acceptance. His goal was to avoid having anyone feel the isolation he experienced in the Bravo group.

“I had mostly semi-younger kids and I had people that weren’t socially adjusted,” Nicholson said. “It was like, ‘Here’s my motley crew.’ Either we were really tall and lanky or short and chubby, but it was a funny way to bring us all together.”

Nicholson worked tirelessly to establish his group culture and serve as a mentor for the other boys within Alpha. Using his own journey with mental illness to aid others experiencing similar tribulations proved cathartic for Nicholson.

“When I was helping other people with their problems, I was kind

of helping myself with my own problems,” Nicholson said. “Some of their problems, it was easy to relate to and sometimes, I’d actually project what I was feeling on to them and solve the problem for them, but also solve it for myself. I had stopped focusing on what I wanted all together. I wanted the other guys to get to where I was in the program. I wanted them to get out before me because they deserved it.”

As day 50 approached, Nicholson had progressed far past the point of graduation. SUWS wasn’t quite ready to let him go, though.

He continued to develop his leadership skills as well as a better understanding of himself. On day 69, he set out on his Solo – a milestone solo hike intended for long-term members that focuses on self-reflection and meditation.

“One of the staff came to check on me as I was sitting by my fire and was like, ‘How you doin’, Bud?’ and I was like, ‘Tomorrow is my 70th day, I’m gonna wake up, I’m gonna still be in this program, I’m not gonna go home,’” Nicholson said. “He was like, ‘I’ve got something planned.’ That made me really anxious.”

Sunday morning arrived, yet – nothing. Disheartened, Nicholson hiked along with the rest of Alpha, struggling to accept that he was still in the program.

Turned out just one more task remained. A staffer gathered Alpha around the campsite, lauded Nicholson for his 70-day stay, and started a sharing session of “H’s and A’s” – Hopes and Appreciations.

“I nearly broke down,” Nicholson recalled. “Everyone did their Hopes and Appreciations for me right before it started raining.”

Now, Nicholson is home, and the storm clouds have passed – for the most part. Like everyone who suffers from mental illness, Nicholson still has his ups and downs.

“Stuff comes to you unexpectedly and even though there will be hardships, it’s only up from here,” he said.

That’s the same positivity that permeated the air as Nicholson concluded the Truth Circle by shouting “It works if you work it and you’re worth it so work it!” Since returning from SUWS and the Pisgah National Forest, Nicholson feels as though he’s come full circle.

“If we were in a Sci-Fi world, I’d think they just cloned me and released a better version, because old me was just in a terrible position for so long,” he said. “After this, I’m not as miserable all the time, I can communicate and I’ve got a completely different look on life. It’s just out of this world that I could get that from just living in the woods and working with these people.”

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## TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR DEPRESSION



According to Live Science, 50 percent of Americans diagnosed with depression seek treatment.

For those that choose treatment, many options are available:



### PRESCRIPTION MEDICATION

Antidepressants can help change a person’s mood, help them sleep, make it easier to concentrate, or increase ones appetite. Although antidepressants help with depression, they come with side effects.



### PYSCHOTHERAPY

Many people choose to treat their depression by communicating with a trained medical health professional. This can help people learn how to deal with their problems by talking through them.



### UNCONVENTIONAL THERAPY

Examples of unconventional therapy for depression consist of wilderness therapy, art and music therapy, color therapy and exercise.



### HOSPITALIZATION

Hospitalization is the most intensive form of treatment and usually last for a few days to up to two weeks in more severe cases.

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