

ADVENTURE WEST VIRGINIA

WVU's outdoor recreation and education program calming fears for second decade

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Despite hailing from the same state as Wilbur and Orville Wright — and being a mechanical and aerospace engineering major, besides — Jeff Devlin had been walking around with a secret.

One that the WVU student from Bryan, Ohio, didn't necessarily want out there, seeing as it was related to all things altitude.

"I was terrified of heights," he confessed. In no time at all, however, he ceased walking around.

Suddenly he was hanging around. Harnessed in the air, hanging around.

About 30-plus feet up, with his feet dangling — and loving every airborne second of it.

Should you be wondering, he didn't have to submit to hypnosis to fight the phobia.

Nor did he binge-listen to self-help podcasts.

All he did was go to work in the summer two years ago with Adventure West Virginia, the WVU-based outdoor recreation and education program now marking its second decade at the school in Morgantown.

"I've gotten a real feeling of fulfillment in helping people overcome their fears," he said.

Or, in other words, said Greg Corio, a WVU vice president who founded the program while a graduate student in 2004, don't be afraid to give it a shot.

Because, he said, when you find out what you can do outdoors, that confidence, like a jaunt across a



WVU file photo

A WVU student climbs rocks during a previous Adventure West Virginia cohort.

zip line, will propel you into success — even if you spend the rest of your professional life working indoors.

"And that's the thing," the assistant vice president for the university's Outdoor Youth Advocacy and Initiatives division said.

"You do find out what you can accomplish, even if you didn't think you could, at first. And a lot of our freshmen have never really been outdoors when they get here."

That's what Adventure West Virginia does. It introduces the freshmen from, say, the concrete enclaves of New Jersey, New York and Philadelphia

to the travel-video majesty of the Mountain State's scenic climbs.

He first pitched it as a pilot program to the university in 2003, as he was finishing his master's in recreation, parks and tourism services.

Corio's pilot graduated in to a full-time discipline and he did, too.

Under his direction, what was once an outdoor orientation program for freshmen has grown to include the WVU Outdoor Education Center in the university's Research Forest — where Devlin conducts those above-ground canopy tours — along with

the founding of Morgantown Adventure Outfitters on Walnut Street.

That's a store managed by Adventure West Virginia that does a brisk trade in outdoor gear.

"Brisk," is the word to describe the burgeoning recreation economy in the Mountain State these days.

In 2022, tourism brought some \$7 billion into state coffers here, Gov. Jim Justice announced last September at a state conference on tourism at Canaan Valley Resort State Park.

But as Corio notes, it isn't just about the outdoors. It's about the interior

life, too.

There is that confidence, as demonstrated by Devlin, the program founder said — and there's something else.

A certain something that can only be hiked to, by way of experience, he said.

The Adventure West Virginia sojourners learn to coexist and problem-solve, especially when negotiating white-water rapids.

And, they get a bigger picture in the classroom, too.

Adventure West Virginia alumni have a good graduation rate, Corio said — plus, they tend to stay friends after they make the

trek across the big stage for their diplomas.

He knew it going to work when he'd see freshmen on campus in those early days whom he knew had just gone through the unique orientation.

They'd toss up a hand and hail a hello to one another as they were walking to class.

"It's that community," he said. "That shared experience. They had been through something together."

UNDER GREG CORIO'S DIRECTION, WHAT WAS ONCE AN OUTDOOR ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR FRESHMEN HAS GROWN TO INCLUDE THE WVU OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTER IN THE UNIVERSITY'S RESEARCH FOREST — WHERE JEFF DEVLIN CONDUCTS THOSE ABOVE-GROUND CANOPY TOURS — ALONG WITH THE FOUNDING OF MORGANTOWN ADVENTURE OUTFITTERS ON WALNUT STREET.



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