



Juan Martinez
Natural Leaders
Network Coordinator
and
2011 National
Geographic Emerging
Explorer

Photograph by Conrad Anker

“When kids who have very little really experience the power of the great outdoors, it can change their whole lives.”

How does a boy whose family lived in a tool shed in South Central Los Angeles grow up to be a national leader, invited to the White House, and driven to change an entire generation’s relationship with nature? Ask Juan Martinez.

“My parents exemplified the values they preached to me—get an education, nurture your family, strive to do better.” But reality on the street was teaching him a very different lesson. “In my neighborhood it was gang members who succeeded, had what I wanted, and could provide for their families. It’s not that I thought it was glamorous, it was survival.” On the verge of following that path, something wonderful happened to him: a failing grade in high school science.

The teacher saw beyond the grade to Martinez’s potential and promised he could pass the class by staying after school for the next three months and joining the Eco Club. The club had carved out a small garden patch where

Martinez spent afternoons planting jalapeño seeds. Then a much bigger idea was planted—the chance to join a two-week scholarship trip to Wyoming’s Teton Science Schools. “Ten years later, I still can’t find words to describe the first moment I saw those mountains rising up from the valley,” Martinez recalls. “Watching bison, seeing a sky full of stars, and hiking through that scenery was overwhelming.”

Returning to L.A. proved even more overwhelming. “Taking a kid from my kind of neighborhood, showing them heaven, then bringing them back home, creates a very hard transition.” Martinez worked through his anger and depression by jumping at any chance to share his experience and head back to the wilderness. Organizations like the Sierra Club and Outward Bound Adventures began to take notice, seeing not only his enthusiasm but also his leadership skills.

Today, Martinez is planting seeds again as a national spokesman for the importance of getting youth into the outdoors, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. He attends White House forums, advises the U.S. Department of the Interior on plans to create a youth conservation corps, serves as National Youth Volunteer Coordinator for the Sierra Club, and organizes youth delegations to conferences on green jobs and outdoor experiences. Above all, he focuses on inspiring and nurturing grassroots action by the 15- to 29-year-old “Millennial” generation. To that end, he spearheads the Natural Leaders Network of the Children & Nature Network, an organization creating links between environmental organizations, corporations, government, education, and individuals to reconnect children with nature.

His Natural Leaders Network focuses on celebrating the positive value of nature rather than dire environmental dilemmas. The message has inspired coast-to-coast efforts: a college student who developed a creative nature play area at a Nebraska zoo, a government employee who mentors young men in New York using nature as a facilitator, a Connecticut security guard who takes school kids on weekend wilderness trips with the Sierra Club.

Martinez marvels at his own transformation. “I went from hating everyone and everything to being part of organizations that are all about building supportive, thriving communities. Nature was my bridge between those two totally different world views.” Interestingly, he did not use that bridge to escape from his roots.

“Even before college, I got job offers in some amazing wilderness locations. It was tempting, but I realized the reason I love nature is because I love people. I thrive on connecting them with the outdoors and watching it change their lives. If I accepted a job that took me away from my community, I’d be like so many other people who leave as soon as they have any success. I know South Central L.A. isn’t the nicest place; there’s still crime, but there’s beauty too. When I think back on the people who were here to step in for me at a critical moment, I want to make that same kind of difference.”

Martinez sees the power of nature every day, from teaching neighbors to start gardens and songbird areas to leading inner-city kids on wilderness adventures. “Some kids on my trips have been in foster care their whole lives, feeling very disconnected from other people. Suddenly they’re out in the backcountry relying on each other. Nature can be a real facilitator for skills that are so crucial in life—communicating, working together, and realizing you can do things you never thought you could (like hiking six rough miles in one day). I take kids who have been abused, heavily medicated for behavior problems, violent, distrustful, but after a few days outdoors they’re sharing feelings and fears, laughing, and thinking like a team. You may be able to see the stars through a computer screen or book, but it’s nothing like lying on the grass looking up at the Milky Way.”

Speaking to educators and nature organizations across the country, Martinez never forgets to champion those kids. “I remind groups that kids who raise their hands and want to be involved are great, probably born, leaders. But we also need to give the kids in detention, the ones who aren’t on the ‘good’ list, a chance. Sometimes just one person showing an interest and giving them an opportunity can change everything.”

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