

Speaker 1: Our last teller is Alexis Horton. Alexis?

Alexis Horton: I'm a little taller today. Maybe every day. Okay, so how many of you like s'mores? Okay. I love s'mores. I love s'mores so much in fact, that I have an indoor s'more-making set. Yes. I like my marshmallows burned, my chocolate extra-dark, and my graham crackers gluten-free. It's a thing.

Alexis Horton: If you've ever made a s'more around a campfire before, you know that there's a process. Someone's passing out marshmallows while there's another one over there with graham crackers and chocolate on it ready to help in the assembling of warm, sugary goodness. It's a collaborative experience, one accompanied by campfire songs and ghost stories or simply recapping the great day that you've had or the cooler, unpredictable things that have happened.

Alexis Horton: There's a peace that runs through everyone around a campfire, one that connects them with nature and with each other. In my job at the DNR working with urban use expos into natural resources, career opportunities, or recreation experiences, I work with teenagers who've never been more than an hour outside the city, who've never camped, and who've never ate a s'more.

Alexis Horton: A few years ago I worked with a group from Detroit. They were at Waterloo recreation area, which is one of our parks about an hour and fifteen minutes west of Detroit. It was a group of about 10, boys and girls who had came up to work on some historic cabins. During the day they were working with our park rangers to finish floors and install windows and paint, and after dinner they were able to enjoy the camp and play games and relax.

Alexis Horton: When they first got to the camp, it was awesome. They pop out of the van, tripping over each other and their bags trying to get to the cabins as soon as possible to pick beds. Then their eyes lit up as we took them around the camp and showed them everything they could do. There was a basketball court, a place for kickball, a beach, a trail that led down to a bog, which was really neat, and a place for a campfire.

Alexis Horton: So after dinner they were excited. They got up, I mean, finished food really quickly and shot off towards the cabins. I'm like, "Oh, this is cool. They've got the [inaudible 00:02:38], they've got to be excited," but my enthusiasm quickly turned into worry because they went into the cabins and did not come out. So, being curious, I went into the girls cabin and I ran into this student named [Sherise 00:02:53]. Now, Sherise was a character in her own right. Hardworking, charismatic, but in this story, honest.

Alexis Horton: So I go, "Sherise, why aren't you guys outside? I thought you were going to explore and hang out." She was like, "Miss Alexis. I am not going outside and getting eaten by a bear." I talked to Sherise for about 15 minutes about this being her first time this far away from home. It was her first time camping. She

had explained that she felt this uneasiness because it was so quiet and that she also really wished that she had cell phone reception.

Alexis Horton: Like I said, Sherise just had this personality. She could get her peers on board to do just about anything. So I convinced Sherise that a night hike would be fun and Sherise, in turn, convinced the girls that a night hike would be fun. So, as they were finding their flashlights and putting on their pants and soaking themselves in bug spray... they were prepared, yes... Sherise marched over to the boys dorm. She knocked on the door and yelled, "Get dressed. We're going on a hike." I was impressed. She got them together so quickly.

Alexis Horton: After they assembled, I went over rules, I answered questions, I assigned partners. No, there were no bears outside. Stay on the trail and always know where your partner is. After that we were on our way. It was dark and the moon was peeking between the trees as we made our way down the marked trail to the bog. They were laughing and joking and I remember the mosquitoes being really, really thick that night, so some of them were making noises, screaming. Somebody had made an animal noise triggering half of them running down the trail. It was so funny, I'm like, what?

Alexis Horton: I'm like, "Okay, you know what?" I had everybody just stop. We shut off our flashlights, we closed our eyes, and we just sat in silence or stood in silence. I asked them what they heard. Together we could hear bats. We could hear the wind blowing through the trees. We could hear crickets in the forest. Then, after about a minute and a half, we opened up our eyes and continued down the trail and finally made it to the bog.

Alexis Horton: When we got down there, there was this clearing where you can look up. The moon was incredibly bright and the stars were the clearest they had ever seen. Enthralled by this, we read the interpretation sign by flashlight, learned about what a bog was and just simply took in the night sky.

Alexis Horton: When I tell you that our journey back was completely different than our journey there, I mean there was almost silence and when we made it back to the cabins, I thought they would be tired. I mean, I was tired. It was like 10-something. They were like, "What's next, Miss Alexis?" I'm like, "What's next? It's almost your bedtime." I leaned over to the chaperone and asked if they had time for a campfire. When we got that green light, we had our next move.

Alexis Horton: Our campfire was great. We set up next to the beach. Half of them helped me build the fire while the other half searched for sticks for s'mores. When they came back we sang, we laughed, we told stories around the campfire and rapped. Some even tried to dance and tell ghost stories.

Alexis Horton: Then I passed out marshmallows for all the students to put on their sticks. I told them how to turn it perfectly so you can get it that golden-brown even though I

like mine burned. Whatever. I went around with chocolate on graham crackers to help them complete their s'mores, each of them. They loved the s'mores. They loved them so much, in fact, they had about three apiece, which I have no idea how they slept that night, but that's another story.

Alexis Horton: That day, those students had a new experience in the outdoors. They let their guards down and connected with one another. They showed more curiosity than fear. They had become s'mores experts by the end of the trip, and they no longer asked what was lurking in the woods. Thank you.