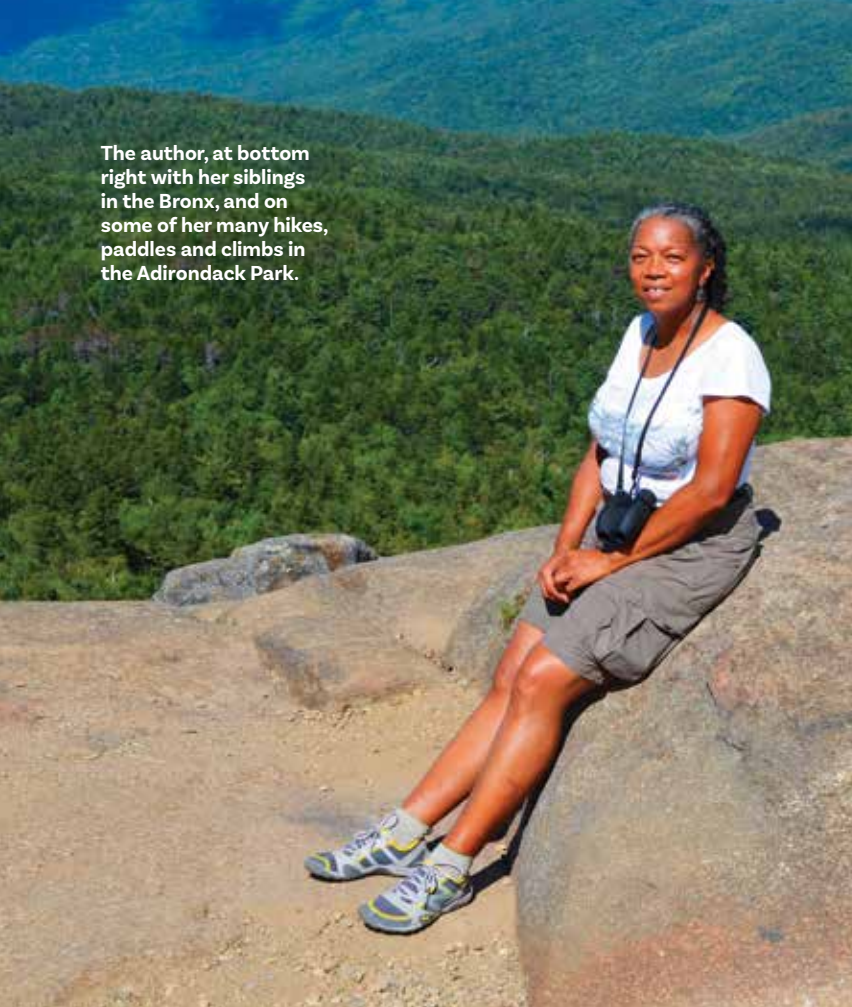


# AND NATURE FOR ALL



The author, at bottom right with her siblings in the Bronx, and on some of her many hikes, paddles and climbs in the Adirondack Park.



IN THE ADIRONDACKS, I'VE FOUND ALL THE OUTDOOR ADVENTURES I DREAMED OF AS A CHILD IN THE SOUTH BRONX. NOW I WANT TO SHARE THOSE EXPERIENCES WITH OTHER PEOPLE LIKE ME

**BY BENITA LAW-DIAO**

**A**S A CHILD GROWING UP in the South Bronx in the 1960s and '70s, I dreamed of one day exploring the outdoors and traveling to scenic natural spaces around the world. Where would an inner-city kid like me get the idea to venture into the great outdoors? All of my friends in New York City were scared of bugs and wide-open spaces, but my father made sure my siblings, George and Priscilla, and I experienced country living. My father was a single parent, the last child and only boy out of 13 sisters in a family of sharecroppers on the Ross Plantation in Alabama. Our father wanted us to know how lucky we were to live up North, but he also wanted us to learn family values and traditions and to work hard. The summers he could afford the Greyhound tickets, we traveled to Birmingham and parts of rural Marengo County (affectionately referred to as the "Piney Woods" or "down home"). When we visited family in the Piney Woods, we milked cows, picked corn, peas and okra, slopped the pigs, chopped wood, washed clothes in a big black cauldron, learned to quilt, used an outhouse and took baths in a foot tub after pumping the water and heating it. Our cousin Sonny Man had a huge dairy farm, where we chased "doctor snakes," collected bug specimens and explored. It might have been too rustic for most of my city friends and relatives, but to me it was liberating, safe and peaceful.

My father moved our family to the Bronx when I was five years old. He was too proud to go on welfare, so he always had two or three jobs at a time—driving yellow taxis, painting apartments, repairing televisions, air conditioners and refrigerators. He would braid my hair, cook our meals, sew and iron our clothes, all while working crazy hours. The police in the 41st precinct, where we lived, nicknamed this area of the Bronx "Fort Apache" because it felt like serving in an army outpost on the frontier. It was a rat-infested, crime-ridden community filled with drugs and drug addicts. The farthest I would venture from our apartment was the front stoop or behind the building because the neighborhood could be quite dangerous.

After two years in Fort Apache, we moved to a section of the Bronx that still had a significant number of European immigrants who had settled there prior to the 1950s. Other than the Devanney Triangle, a pocket park on Burnside | *Continued on page 65*

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Continued from page 44

Avenue that was across from my building, the nearest park we were aware of was Echo Park, a half-mile away. To elementary-school kids, the 4.38-acre park (now known as Richman Park) was huge, with trees and bushes and rocks to climb on. It inspired me to want to experience rock-climbing.

My siblings and I were latchkey kids. My father was working so hard to make ends meet he didn't have time to take us to parks, the circus, the zoo, museums or cultural events. Once, on one of the hottest days of the summer when I was about eight years old, while Dad was at work, I walked from Creston Avenue across Tremont Avenue to the Bronx Zoo (round trip: five miles) by myself. No one told me that you had to pay admission to get into the zoo, so I was turned away and walked back home disappointed.

When my father was growing up, the owner of the Ross Plantation would not allow him to get an education, because he knew he would want to leave. My father and his youngest sister were the only ones out of 14 children to get even a fifth-grade education. What little schooling he got was because my grandmother would enroll him under fictitious names after harvest time. He truly valued education and filled our home with books. Our white neighbors would give us their Reader's Digest Condensed Books and National Geographic magazines when they were through with them. As I got older, I started to purchase Seventeen and other teen magazines, which usually highlighted camps and summer activities for young people with financial means. Most of my summers were spent sitting on my fire escape drawing and reading about places I wanted to visit. If Dad could afford it, I would go to Alabama or spend a weekend with my aunt who lived on Long Island. I wanted to go to sleepaway camp, camp out with my family, hike through the woods and climb mountains, go canoeing on a lake, swim, explore the national parks and take bicycle tours in Europe and Canada. This is what I read about, but I knew no one in my neighborhood who did these things.

During my last two years of high school, we lived in the University Heights

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**AND NATURE FOR ALL**

section of the Bronx, which had deteriorated significantly once New York University moved its campus to Manhattan. My father became a superintendent for a building that was owned by a slumlord. Roberto Clemente State Park was just a few blocks west of where we lived, but it was too dangerous to go there because of drug addicts, dealers and gangs. I yearned to be in green spaces, but that was not an option. As the area declined and landlords found themselves unable to make a profit off their real estate, many burned their buildings to collect the insurance money. During my last years in high school, entire blocks were reduced to ashes.

On the evening of July 13, 1977, two separate lightning strikes caused an electrical blackout for most of Greater New York City. Several Bronx neighborhoods, including my own, were completely destroyed by vandals during the blackout. When I left for college at the end of that summer, I felt like I was escaping a war zone.

I arrived in Buffalo for undergraduate school the year that Love Canal was hitting the news. The plight of the people who lived there spurred my friends and me into action. My African-American roommate, who was also from the Bronx, educated me and enlisted me in protests, community events and letter-writing campaigns. Meanwhile my cousin, who was a science teacher at City Honors School in Buffalo, would take me hiking in the Niagara Gorge and other beautiful natural locations around the area. She exposed me to different ways I could enjoy nature.

My college boyfriend wanted to be a park ranger, but he never applied for any positions because the salary was so low that he worried he would not be able to afford to help his parents once he graduated. One summer, I applied for a position at Yellowstone National Park and I never heard back. Even if I had been offered the job, I did not have enough money to get to Wyoming, and my family could not help me.

After undergraduate school, I attended Cornell University, where I enrolled in an outdoor survival class. I learned



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“Leave No Trace” principles, first aid, and how to prepare for a wide range of outdoor experiences. I took environmental science classes and completed a graduate project on low-income populations who consume fish from New York State waterways that contain organochlorine contaminants. I sought all the outdoor experiences I had always dreamed of as a child. While living in Ithaca, I hiked and biked every trail that I could access.

One day I saw a brochure for the Adirondack Park. I had never heard of it and I had no idea that it was as big as it appeared on a map. That spring my boyfriend, nephew and I rented a KOA cabin in Wilmington, but no one had warned us about blackfly season. As soon as we arrived, the blackflies introduced themselves to us. I remember trying to make breakfast and our eggs were seasoned with blackflies. We had mosquito repellent, but no nets. Despite the blackfly experience, we could not wait to return.

When I moved to the Capital Region after graduate school, I was thrilled to be closer to the Adirondacks. I started planning exploratory hikes as I learned of new trails. My biggest problem was that none of my friends had an interest in visiting the Adirondack Park. Luckily, the region was part of my territory through my job as a public health nutritionist at the New York State Department of Health. I traveled to 23 counties, and I got to know the people, places and some of the struggles of living in the North Country. I never considered traveling alone in the Adirondacks scary, but my Black male coworker said he would never venture into the region by himself or without a white person. He thought I was foolish to travel in some very remote places by myself.

I’ve had people call the police on me in the North Country, a priest once accused me of being in the wrong neighborhood under false pretenses, and one man wanted to touch my hair because he thought it looked like wool. But I can honestly say that none of these experiences scared or deterred me in any way. The funny thing is, even some of my white New York City coworkers were uncomfortable in the open spaces of the Adirondacks.



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### AND NATURE FOR ALL

I joined the Adirondack Mountain Club and started participating in trail maintenance every year for my birthday. When friends and family would ask me what I wanted to do to celebrate, I would tell them I would be in the Adirondacks. After I got married, my husband, who was born in a hut in Senegal, West Africa, never joined me on my hiking or camping trips. But when my daughter was born, I finally had an outdoors partner. We would go on mother-daughter camping trips and bring her friends who had never been hiking.

I established a community garden in the South End of Albany on a vacant lot where children were playing among hazardous waste. Through the garden, I realized how disconnected urban adults and their children were from their environment. Critters would venture into our garden, and it amazed me that adults did not recognize skunks, raccoons or woodchucks in the heart of the city. If people living in the cities had no exposure to nature and didn't understand the threats of climate change, how could we expect them to want to preserve fragile environments and adopt the necessary changes?

While I was volunteering in the South End of Albany, Brother Yusuf Burgess was doing environmental work in the Arbor Hill section of the city. He asked me to chaperone some of his camping trips for teens from the community. He would offer me scholarships to give low-income inner-city children access to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Environmental Education camps each summer. You might expect these first-time campers to be apprehensive about spending a week in the woods, but Brother Yusuf had prepared them and their parents for an experience that changed the trajectory of many of their lives.

I helped start a farmers' market in the South End and began teaching a cooking class on plant-based recipes from the African Diaspora. As community members got to know and trust me, they learned that I hike, bicycle, kayak and travel every chance I can. I explained that most things I indulge in do not cost much. One day several ladies from the community

### AND NATURE FOR ALL

told me that they had never been hiking and wanted to go with me. I prepared the women for the hike and selected Sleeping Beauty in Fort Ann because it is a good beginner mountain. I knew it would not be too crowded and it has great views of Lake George. As we were hiking up the mountain, I learned that several of the women—whose ages varied from their mid-20s to their 60s—were ex-offenders, one smoked cigarettes, one was starting a new business and one was studying to be a nurse. All of them had experienced different types of severe trauma in their lives.

Initially, they were surprised when they heard me greet people who passed us on the mountain. After they realized that everyone was pretty friendly, they started greeting people too. Then they began asking people coming off the mountain whether we were close to the summit. Eventually, we came upon two forest rangers, who they stopped to ask questions about their jobs, the mountain and whether they were single. They posed for pictures with the rangers as though the men were celebrities. I'm sure it lifted the rangers' spirits because the women were thrilled to meet them. As we approached the summit and the view of Lake George, the women realized what they had accomplished. They began to cry and express their feelings about the majesty of the place. I had no idea the hike would have this impact on them, and I began to cry, too.

That experience galvanized my intention to expose as many people as I can to nature at their comfort level. I know being in nature cleanses and heals, inspires and fills one's heart with joy, because it has always brought me peace and comfort. In order to save our planet, we need to help people connect to it, understand that it is in jeopardy and recognize the importance of saving it. We cannot accomplish this by isolating people from certain spaces.

So, how do I get people to join me for outdoor adventures?

I post photos with details of my trips on Facebook. When I stay in a hotel, cottage or cabin, my friends and family realize that the Adirondacks has things to

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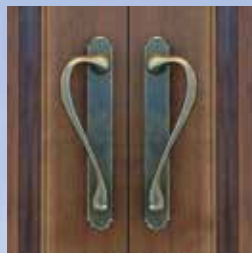


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do for those who are not hard-core outdoorspeople. Recently, I have had four retired acquaintances ask me if they can join me on one of my hikes. Another friend prefers to come to the Adirondacks with me, saying she feels safer because I know my way around. Other people believe I am pushing my luck by venturing into a rural, predominantly white place like the Adirondacks.

But now that I have found my way to the Adirondacks, I feel quite at home. We are so lucky to have this incredible park in our state. I hope others will have the opportunity to experience the Adirondacks, because they will learn to treasure it as those of us who know it do. ▲

### JOIN THE CLUB

The following organizations are devoted to helping under-represented groups enjoy the outdoors.

**The Appalachian Mountain Club's Youth Opportunities Program** ([www.outdoors.org](http://www.outdoors.org)) partners with organizations and schools in urban and under-resourced communities that historically have faced barriers to outdoor recreation.

**Black Girls Do Bike** ([www.blackgirlsdobike.com](http://www.blackgirlsdobike.com)) has several New York-based groups, including the Capital District and Rochester.

**Black Girls Hike Buffalo** is a hiking group formed to encourage women of color to venture out and enjoy the outdoors. Find the group on Facebook.

**Brotherhood of Skiers** ([www.nbs.org](http://www.nbs.org)) is a national network of Black ski and snowboard clubs, including several in New York.

**Brothers of Climbing** ([www.boccrew.com](http://www.boccrew.com)) is based in Brooklyn.

**Outdoor Afro** ([www.outdoorafro.com](http://www.outdoorafro.com)) is a national organization with more than 80 leaders in 42 cities around the country, including several in New York State.

**Youth EdVenture & Nature Network** ([www.theyenn.com](http://www.theyenn.com)), founded by the late Brother Yusuf Burgess, is dedicated to expanding opportunities for children and families in the Albany area to reconnect with nature.

**Benita Law-Diao** recently retired from the New York State Department of Health as a public health nutritionist. She is on the boards of John Brown Lives! and Adirondack Experience museum. She lives in Latham.

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