

The Washington Post

www.washingtonpost.com

THURSDAY, AUGUST 10, 2023

Style

They lost a piece of girlhood, then reclaimed it in an unlikely place

Isolated by covid and technology, young women go on a quest for friendship
at the formerly boys-only Scouts National Jamboree

BY ANNE BRANIGIN

GLEN JEAN, W.Va. — At any moment, Audrey Perez knew it could all fall apart.

The 16-year-old sat on a piece of tarp and stared at Mia Strouder on the other side of the wooden Jenga tower: three feet tall and already trembling under its own weight.

Audrey had barely survived her turn. She tugged a block at the tower's rickety bottom while her two companions, 14-year-old Mia and 13-year-old Lucy Hurd, chanted: "Fall! Fall! Fall!"

Now it was Mia's turn. Unlike Audrey, Mia didn't mind bending the rules: She leaned her head against the tower to keep it from falling, or used her other hand to steady the wobbly column as she tap-tap-tapped a block out from the tower.

"You guys are such cheaters," Audrey grumbled as Mia again employed her questionable tactics.

"That's just being creative," Mia replied.

In ordinary circumstances, Audrey may not have been friends with Mia and Lucy. Sophomore year was in the rear-view for Audrey, while Mia and Lucy had just finished middle school. Only a couple of years separated them, but they were worlds apart.

Audrey was stoic and driven; she



MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

Lucy Hurd, 13, center, and Mia Strouder, 14, take an archery class at the BSA's National Jamboree in Glen Jean, W.Va.

taught herself sign language and had decent aim with firearms and bows and arrows. Mia and Lucy giggled about boys and peppered their conversations with TikTok-isms — "gang gang" and "thank you to my man" — which Audrey, for the most part, ignored.

But the trio were Scouts — not Girl Scouts, but girl members of the BSA, formerly known as the Boy Scouts of America. And they had traveled together from the D.C. area to the hills of West Virginia, part of the first class of female Scouts to take part in the organiza-



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

TOP: Rows of tents set up by Scouts for the BSA's National Jamboree. BOTTOM: Lucy Hurd, 13; Audrey Perez, 16, and Mia Strouder, 14, as they wait to ride a zip line. Jana, 17, left and Cherry, 18, offer sandwiches.



tion's pinnacle experience, the National Jamboree.

It couldn't have come at a better time for the organization.

The pandemic had been devastating for the Scouts; membership, already on the decline, tumbled even lower as group activities were restricted, and the Jamboree, normally held every four years and scheduled for 2021, was pushed back. But a modest rebound happened last year, buoyed by a grow-

ing number of female Scouts. (In 2022, more than 43,000 Scouts were girls, according to the organization.) The coronavirus global health emergency was ended this year, and the BSA's theme for 2023 signaled the organization's attitude: "Forward."

The Jamboree couldn't have come at a better time for Audrey, either. Sophomore year had sucked. Her grades slipped for the first time, and she had broken up with her best friend, an outgoing but "manipulative" girl she met the year before in biology class.

Actually, the past three years had been a downer for all of the girls.

A cluster of adults shook their heads in amusement at the intense Jenga game. They were surrounded by more than 10,000 acres of pristine West Virginia woodland: miles and miles of trails, towering zip lines, a laser gun range, a world-class skatepark and giant climbing walls at their disposal. But here the girls had settled, teasing and conniving and giggling over a children's game — one in which solitude is all but impossible. A game that encourages closeness and fierce attention to your opponents until the startling and inevitable crash.

For the adults at the Jamboree —

2,700-plus volunteer leaders, staff and BSA officials — the event had the air of a high school reunion. Elder Scouts in kerchiefs hugged and clapped each other on the back; troop leaders and volunteers in loose shorts and wide-brimmed canvas hats marched through the various activity tents, greeting familiar faces and new ones.

They were the ones who transformed the Summit Bechtel Reserve in southern West Virginia into a Scout city. Ground that, decades ago, was hollowed out by coal mines was now dotted with food distribution centers, a field hospital, a post office, shuttles and water stations.

But the most impressive sight at the reserve was the hundreds of tents — orange and blue and gray and brown — crisscrossing the hills in a tight, neat grid. That was the work of the Scouts themselves: more than 13,000 kids, ages 11 to 17, in mud-splattered brown boots, nearly all of them attending their first Jamboree.

Audrey and Mia were sharing one of those tents.

Audrey first spotted Mia earlier this year at a meeting for one of the Jamboree Shakedown, camping events organized by regional BSA councils to help prepare the Scouts for the big summer excursion. Mia was sitting alone on her phone. Every other Scout there seemed to have their friend groups established, and Audrey didn't want to butt into those.

"She looked nice. I also didn't want to be alone, so I was like, 'Might as well,'" Audrey said.

At the Shakedown in June, the pair met Lucy and became a trio.

Life in the D.C. metro area hadn't been easy for Audrey. In 2019, she and her family moved from El Paso, with its high desert and centuries-old Spanish missions, to the suburban enclave of Rockville, Md. Audrey was confronting one of the most tumultuous periods of a young person's life: the start of middle school.

She was still adjusting to her new environment — where all the other kids had known each other since elementary



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

Mia aims for a volleyball. Participants played with one arm to better understand the challenges faced.



The Jamboree offered accommodations for various worship needs.



People walk the trails at the Jamboree.

school — when the pandemic pushed students out of the classroom and into their homes, where screens illuminated their faces from morning to night.

Audrey retreated to her basement room and avoided her parents. She felt as if they were taking their pandemic stress out on her. Scouting, on the other hand, gave her surmountable challenges she could fix her mind to: She learned how to tie knots while social distancing and hiked for miles in the summer of 2020, panting behind a face mask.

But all the girls feel as if they've lost something during the pandemic that they haven't quite gained back: good study habits, attention spans, confi-

dence in social settings. Lucy, a gymnast, felt her skills and physical conditioning deteriorate. Mia, accustomed to interacting with people via screens, stopped looking at people's faces when they spoke to her.

They are hyper-aware of how technology has shaped them. Relationships are both measurable and fragile. Popularity is proved with statistics such as Snapchat streaks — amassed by interacting with others on the social media platform at least once a day. An awkward encounter with your crush? It's time to block them. Being so online makes it easier for everyone to bully each other and gossip behind friends' backs, they say. The bonds that built a tower yesterday can, at any time, cascade into a pile of blocks.

"I feel like I kind of have commitment issues," Mia said. "After a while, I start getting — not bored, I wouldn't say bored —"

"Basically bored," Audrey interjected, drawing laughter.

"Basically, I feel like it's kind of hard to keep a relationship," Mia continued.

"The internet definitely messed us all up," Audrey said.

"Especially because people text differently than how they talk in real life," Mia said.

Scouting, a 113-year-old rite of passage for generations of American boys, helped save the girls from total boredom and staved off loneliness in the pandemic years. They know the myriad opportunities being a Scout affords them, benefits adults extolled all the time: the prestigious rank of Eagle Scout; a network they can lean on; an edge during the competitive college application process; life and leadership skills.

But what these girls wanted most from their Jamboree experience? Meeting "good people." In her duffel bag, Audrey packed gifts she could hand out to the girls she would be camping with: 72 yellow rubber ducks wearing sunglasses.

She was trying to adopt a freer attitude, step out of her comfort zone.

"We're never going to see [some of] these people again," Audrey said. "Might as well be weird, I guess."

Teens everywhere are still trying to

gain their footing, said Angelique Minnett, the national chair of the Scouts BSA program. They were starting to date, expand their social circles and articulate their interests — then their world suddenly shrank.

"The reentry is rough," Minnett said. "They had to kind of figure out what the rules were, I guess, for how to behave. ... What's appropriate, what's not appropriate."

Helping children contend with a rapidly changing world was one of Scouting's initial missions. Founded in 1910, the Boy Scouts was born in the midst of a moral panic spurred by the industrial age. Adults fretted that young men were becoming less masculine. Cities, full of immigrant and Black youths, were seen as corrupting influences, brimming with vice and violence. The specter of the juvenile delinquent emerged.

The Scouts was designed to be the alternative to the urban gang. It instilled a sense of belonging and identity; upheld Christian values; built character; and forged leaders. It countered the corruption of city life with the purity of the wilderness. Out of professed reverence for Indigenous cultures, early iterations of Scouting groups romanticized and appropriated Native American lore, hoping to impart upon White Anglo children a sense of ritual and magic.

This year's Jamboree is a testament to how much the organization has evolved. The third day of the Jamboree featured a Muslim religious service; an LGBTQ+ affinity tent offered Scouts a safe and supportive space; and disabled scoutmasters led activities promoting mental health, diversity and inclusivity. A bronze statue was dedicated to the first class of female Eagle Scouts, and a little more than 1 in 5 Scouts at the Jamboree were girls. Physical maps were not printed; everyone downloaded the official Jamboree app to make appointments and get around.

The 2023 Jamboree is also a testimony to what legions of Scouts hope has remained the same.

"They're back out in the world, back doing things with their peers," Minnett said. "They're outside in nature. And we're reminding them of what it is to be a good human."

Audrey, Mia and Lucy set up camp on a Wednesday. On Thursday, the trio flew down zip lines, played one-armed volleyball, shot laser guns, ate pizza and posed with Regis, a 17-year-old bald eagle with a busted wing. By Friday, Audrey's mood had soured.

She blamed the heat, the long walks from activity to activity, and missing lunch.

During archery that afternoon, Lucy teased Mia about a boy who caught her eye at a Hawaiian-themed beach bash the night before. ("He was so ugly!" Lucy squealed.) But Audrey found the party boring. (Too much "basic" music, such as Miley Cyrus.)

As Lucy raised herself on her tiptoes so she could hit her target, Audrey was already finished and staring at the ground.

"Bruh, why is it going like that," Lucy muttered as another arrow whizzed into the side of a hill.

"You're holding it too high," the instructor said.

Audrey lost her patience in the shuttle back to the campsite. Mia and Lucy had leaped out of the van, their snack wrappers strewn across the floor and seats. Audrey snapped at them for leaving a mess and huffed as she snatched up their trash and put it in a nearby bin.

"They're both really young and sometimes they get on my nerves," Audrey said. She felt like an older sibling, and being the responsible one wasn't always very fun.

No matter what gender a Scout is, there's an education that happens at camp that can't quite be replicated at school, says Jay Mechling, a professor emeritus at the University of California at Davis and the author of "On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth."

There's the wilderness education, the



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

Mia braves the zip line.



Lucy winces after missing a shot.



A tired Audrey waits for dinner.

one most Americans associate with Scouting and summer camps: the canoeing, the hiking, the bonding over the campfires. But throughout the years, Boy Scouts have helped each other deal with weightier, messier challenges: losses of friendships and family, homesickness and loneliness.

"I would say the most important agenda that goes on at camp, whether it's a Scout camp or just a private camp, is the kind of social and emotional edu-

cation that goes on," Mechling said.

At the start of the Jamboree, Audrey, Mia and Lucy helped shore each other up against loneliness. By the end, there were spaces between them where other friends entered.

The last day of the Jamboree, Mia and Audrey sat together once again at the picnic table where they had gossiped and eaten grilled cheese and barbecue chicken dinners.

"We kind of sprouted our wings a little and met new people, so we haven't really been hanging out that much together," Audrey said. Mia stared off at the horizon.

Audrey's arms, browned by the sun, were covered in flowery doodles — the work of a new friend, Ace, who scribbled them on her when she was bored. Mia and Lucy started hanging out with some girls from Philadelphia.

Audrey's new group of friends, closer to her in age, had cared for her when she injured her feet running down a hill in the dark. That didn't stop her from dancing the night away with them in crowded, sweaty mosh pits while sheets of bubbles from a foam machine fell on their shoulders.

She had already made plans with one of them to see "Barbie" when they got home. It had been a long time coming, but Audrey felt truly optimistic and happy. A girl who had found her center again.

"They genuinely make me feel like we've known each other all our lives, and we only met last week," Audrey gushed.

Her favorite moment came when one of their gang got their hands on a whole marble sheet cake heaped with frosting. They didn't have utensils, so they shoveled the cake into their mouths with their hands. The soft summer night enveloped them, their mouths full of sugar and laughter, their fingers glossy and sweet.