

This summer I had the great fortune of attending the Brown Environmental Leadership Lab (also known as "BELL") held in Bristol, Rhode Island. BELL is one of the renowned continuing education summer programs at Brown University and is designed to bring students with the common passion of helping the Earth together. The leadership program accepts students not only from the United States, but from all over the world; in my course alone we had students from Japan, China, Russia, Bahrain and India. Most of the students are within the age bracket of 14 to 18 years old and all of them have led a self-constructed project, or series of projects, to better the environment in their local communities.

The two week long session was held in a remote area on the shore of the Narragansett Bay. We resided in elevated tents facing the bay and spent community time in a centrally located lodge. The overall atmosphere of the camp was extremely serene and thought provoking. Many of the students made the most of their time at camp by waking up to watch the sunrise and participating in morning runs/ walks on the beach at the end of a secluded trail. Once back from the jog, the students embarked upon the daily routine of life at BELL. This included meal time, daily chores, free time, solo time and instruction time. Every day was a new adventure in which we learned and applied newly acquired knowledge to real life situations. We partook in a variety of lessons, some of which included: soil bacteria, forestry, marine biology, sustainable development, sustainable agriculture, sustainable harvesting of clams and other animals, construction of solar showers and ovens, debates about energy use and the presidential election, storm water, e-waste, and our body burden. Not only were we reading about and discussing these issues in a classroom setting, but we were visiting and seeing first-hand the environmental issues we face in our modern world.

While at BELL, we were encouraged to step outside of our comfort zones (whether it be sleeping with bugs in the tent or talking to new people) and form a closely knit community. This challenge of trying something new may seem miniscule to some, but throughout the course of the program, it proved successful in opening people up to new and often vital experiences. A major part of this transformative process was giving up our phones for the course of the two weeks. By the looks on the faces of my peers, it was clear that giving up this piece of technology was a painful and unknown experience. This numb and empty feeling was later replaced by something so much more valuable: a community. Without the distracting and often annoying phones, we were able to focus on the tasks and group activities at hand. As the first week proceeded, the group became closer and closer. Not one person was excluded and even the quietest of peers were enjoying getting to know the others. The instructors played a major role in creating this inclusive atmosphere: they constantly mixed up the groups and encouraged us to meet new people. This sense of belonging, acceptance, compassion and love helped spur much learning not only in the subject of unique leadership styles, but also ways in which leaders could meritoriously seek out problems and solve them.

Another major part of the BELL curriculum was creative thinking, or brainstorming. The brainstorming sessions not only broadened our horizon when it came to environmental issues, but also shined a light on the complexity and deeply rooted nature of these problems. My favorite activity while at BELL was the kayaking adventure; the entire group got the opportunity to visit the saltmarshes and identify the wildlife in the nearby areas. This activity introduced me to the idea of marine life conservation; never before had I thought about how chemicals were affecting the water in the bay, as

well as the animals that resided in it. My time at BELL has taught me an array of valuable lessons ranging from the proper way to debate environmental issues to the confidence and skill set desired of a true leader. I strongly believe that BELL has given me a clear path for the future; it has introduced pertinent information that will help me decide my career, it has exposed me to different challenges/ problem solving techniques and most importantly, through meeting incredible people and partaking in group bonding, it has made me strive to be a better person.