

# REACHING NEW HEIGHTS *with RU Outdoors*

By Mary Hardbarger

Photos by Andrew Borak



**I**t's no secret that Southwest Virginia is home to some of the nation's greatest outdoor treasures. From the pristine New River - one of the world's oldest tributaries - to the rolling Appalachian Mountains, the area is truly representative of nature's bounty. Situated in the heart of it all is Radford University, a prime higher-education destination for students seeking adventure.

"From the rivers to the rocks, this area is the outdoor hub of the East Coast," said Andrew Borak '08.

Borak is the assistant director for the Student Recreation and Wellness Department and oversees all of the outdoor programs, which offer a wide range of activities designed to thrill. Rock climbing, mountain biking, skydiving and kayaking are among the heart-racing activities students can explore. At the RU Outdoors office, located inside the new Student Recreation and Wellness Center, students have access to a variety of outdoor accessories, such as camping equipment, canoes and mountain bikes.

"Anything you need to go outside, you can get it with us," Borak said.

Locally, students enjoy tubing down the New River and traversing the abundant hiking and biking trails. Just hours away in West Virginia and North Carolina are world-class whitewater rapids. Grayson Highlands State Park in Mouth of Wilson, Virginia - about 90 miles south of Radford - is one of the most beautiful spots on the Appalachian Trail, Borak said. The park, where wild ponies roam freely, is a favorite of senior Derek Stokes of Woodbridge.

Stokes is a student-worker employed by RU Outdoors. Students apply each semester for positions within the program that prepare them for real-world challenges and teach leadership skills. In order to qualify, students must undergo rigorous testing, training and skill evaluations, including the facilitation of a trip from start to finish.

"Students are really vested in this program," said Director of Student Recreation and Wellness Barry Miller. "And I think that adds to its quality."

Stokes took his first trip with RU Outdoors his freshman year.

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Derek Stokes



RU Outdoors fosters a "challenge-by-choice" environment in its activities. Whether caving, paddleboarding, hiking or rafting, all participants have a hand in establishing group expectations.

"The experience really inspired me," he said. "To see a student just two years older than me leading a full trip by himself made me want to get involved and be in that same situation."

Stokes became an RU Outdoors volunteer as a sophomore and scaled his way up to his current title of rock-climbing leader.

"This has been a highlight of my college career," he said. "Through RU Outdoors, I found my spot at Radford University and a great group of friends who are looking to better themselves."

Among Stokes' group of outdoor companions is Sophie Knudsen '15, a former rock-climbing leader.

Knudsen recalled being a young teen when her cousin, also a Radford University alumna, would share stories of her trips with RU Outdoors and take her on similar adventures.

"From those experiences with her, I chose to go to Radford," Knudsen said.

The most life-changing trip Knudsen took with the program was a two-week summer excursion to the

Colorado Rockies. There, she and eight others rock climbed and hiked with the goal of reaching a 14,000-foot peak.

"We never reached the peak. We were about 2,000 feet away when conditions dictated that we turn around," she said. "It was pretty disappointing, but exhilarating at the same time. It taught me a lot about myself; to be more self-sufficient and independent."

On that trip, she formed friendships she may have never enjoyed without RU Outdoors.

"The thing that's great about this program is that we're all from different walks of life," Knudsen said. "We all have different interests, but it is here where our passion for the outdoors collides. And that's true for student-leaders and participants alike. I think that plays a huge role in people finding their niche and drive at Radford University." ■

