This school year marks the 50th anniversary of a legendary Andover program—Search & Rescue (S&R). Known as Outdoor Pursuits since 2010, Phillips Academy’s version of Outward Bound has been changing lives since the visionary duo of Headmaster John Kemper and faculty member Joshua Miner introduced expeditionary learning to the PA campus in 1964. Amazingly, the program has endured a half-century of change in the industries of outdoor education and risk management—narrowly avoiding its demise on more than one occasion—and has remained thoroughly relevant through the ages.

ORIGINS
In 1981, Miner wrote in Outward Bound USA: Crew Not Passengers that, prior to conceiving S&R or Outward Bound USA, he had hoped to replicate at Andover a program called The Break, which he had learned about from German educator, philosopher, and Outward Bound–founder Kurt Hahn while on the faculty at Gordonstoun in Scotland in the 1950s. Miner believed The Break would counter PA’s competitive culture by pitting Andover boys not against one another and their interscholastic rivals, but against themselves in healthy physical exercise that also was good for mind and soul.

However, after a yearlong experiment with The Break, the inertness of tradition proved insurmountable. Such a sweeping change, it appeared, might limit the Academy’s “eminence on the athletic field, its Andover way of doing things,” lamented Miner. Ultimately, he said, faculty were “not in search of innovation.” The Break did leave a mark on the Academy’s physical education program by introducing the now staple drown-proofing. It also paved the way for Miner to weave additional elements of Hahn’s educational philosophy into the fabric of Andover life—specifically in the form of expeditionary learning via the Outward Bound method. This influence inspired Miner to institute a novel experiential outdoor program at Andover that he called Search & Rescue.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS
Within two years, the S&R name had become an anachronism, in the view of former S&R director Nat Smith. “We were still looking at Outward Bound as a model, but increasingly just for exercises, not [to form] a search and rescue team,” says Smith. As Outward Bound and S&R matured, the freethinking attitudes of the ’60s and ’70s compelled innovation and limit-pushing in Andover’s program. Alumni remember scaling “The Wall”; exploring subterranean tunnels that linked distant sectors of campus; running to Holt Hill and the Shawsheen River; glissading
in winter down a glacial escarpment at Pomp’s Pond; partaking in three-day solo wilderness expeditions; and challenging themselves to survive with nothing but a live rabbit, a pot, and some matches.

One memorable S&R tradition was the Night Drop Off, an orienteering exercise, in which students evaded their “enemy” (faculty members patrolling in vans and other passersby) as they made their way from a faraway location back to campus in the dark, with nothing but a rudimentary map of the area that did not disclose their starting point. Gary Meller ’68 recalls: “In order to get home, we had to find the road, but in order not to get caught, we had to dive into the bushes every time a car came by. Since this was a Friday night, there were a lot of cars on the road, and we made very slow progress back toward the school. I think the last person arrived sometime Saturday morning.”

This activity, and perhaps others for which S&R was becoming notorious, excited the students but also provoked a bit of controversy among Academy administrators.

In April 1966, Dean G. Grenville Benedict wrote a pithy memo to Jerry Pieh, then director of S&R, in response to a recent incident witnessed by residents of Dascomb Road in Andover; they had seen boys being dumped from a car at the edge of the woods. Assuming it must have been an S&R operation, Benedict concluded by writing, “[The residents] would like to be informed in advance of such strange and ominous undertakings calculated to stir the apprehensions of the citizenry! I hope you will find ways and means of doing so.”

Though this episode may have been a small blip on the screen, there is no escaping the real risks and consequences of rugged adventure. In winter 1969, the program suffered a tragic loss when Mark Larner ’69 died in a freak accident while descending Mt. Adams. “Today, such an event would destroy a program,” says Faculty Emeritus Vic Henningsen ’69, a good friend of Larner’s and an S&R student leader at the time. “But such was the culture of the time—both nationally and at the Academy—that S&R continued. Two weeks later, classmate Jim McGinnis and I led a group of eight lowers on a long climb of Mt. Washington via the Boott Spur and Lion Head trails.”

**COMING OF AGE**

In spring 1971, Kemper published a letter to the PA community to assuage anxiety over the liberalization and democratization of the school, including increased freedom and inevitable coeducation. He highlighted programs that could “offset the corrosiveness of the phenomena which concern” families, citing S&R as one that would “instill confidence and compassion in our students.”

As the Academy revised its operational ethos and merged with Abbot, S&R gained a reputation as one of the most egalitarian “sports” offered at Andover, one in which students and faculty of all backgrounds participated in the same activities and collaborated in fully complementary roles.

Students consistently have found a level playing field in S&R and Outdoor Pursuits, perhaps nowhere more than on the bell tower. Lydia Goetze, S&R instructor from 1980 to 1995 and director for three years,
Vic Henningsen ’69 on Search & Rescue

My first encounter with Search & Rescue (S&R) came in fall 1965, when, as a ninth-grader, I volunteered to be a “victim” in a rescue drill and was lowered out of a second-floor Sam Phil window in a stretcher.

I took winter S&R as a lower and became a student leader (the first!) as an upper. In those days, Andover was still a farm town with lots of open country, and students knew little of the surrounding area—we could leave campus to go downtown only twice a week; we could leave on a day or overnight excuse twice a term. Hence, even venturing somewhere as close as Holt Hill or Pomp’s Pond was exploring terra incognita. For a number of us, S&R was literally a way of escaping a highly restrictive Academy culture for an afternoon or a weekend. The program attracted a varied assortment: outdoor enthusiasts, artists, musicians, actors, and others who found daily life at school chafing. Nat Smith was the director, and a more gifted educator and leader I have yet to meet. Nat and S&R kept more than one unhappy student from abandoning PA.

It’s a pleasure, and a bit of a surprise, to see that the program has endured. Its survival reflects how it has astutely adapted to changes in school and student culture. In the ’60s and ’70s, the program’s uncertainty was what made it successful: No one asked what time S&R students would be back because they knew it depended entirely on the challenges the day brought. Today’s overly scheduled youth wouldn’t sign up for such a situation, nor would today’s risk managers permit many of what were for us routine activities. But I expect that a significant amount of challenge as well as the sense of accomplishment and the camaraderie we enjoyed in the old days remain very much present in Outdoor Pursuits. If they didn’t, the program would have collapsed years ago.

I wasn’t much of an athlete, but I was an active hiker and backpacker and S&R looked like a natural fit. In those days, Cochran Chapel and Sam Phil bells regulated our lives, so I liked showing up for S&R every afternoon with absolutely no sense of what was about to happen to me for the next few hours—knowing that making my afternoon class would depend entirely on my own and my group’s ingenuity in getting ourselves out of whatever situation Nat Smith created to challenge us. It was an injection of glorious unpredictability in an otherwise grimly predictable life. And I truly enjoyed the people who took S&R in those days, folks I don’t think I would have come to know in any other way.

When I returned to the program as a faculty member, further developing student leadership was a priority. In those still highly structured times, the partnership that formed between student leaders and faculty instructors was quite unusual. We handed student leaders significant responsibilities—quite empowering for those so chosen—and they handled it well. For some, it was their defining Andover experience.

I learned much from the pedagogy of S&R. Set a challenge and let a group of students figure out how to meet it with only minimal advice (largely safety-related) from the adult. S&R was one of Andover’s early “student-centered” educational endeavors, and I’m sure that approach to education significantly influenced my own classroom teaching.

My S&R experience certainly influenced other aspects of my early career, which included a number of tours as a seasonal park ranger in northern Vermont and four years as director of Harvard’s Freshman Outdoor Program when I was doing my doctorate there in the ’80s. By the time I returned to Andover in 1985, I’d been leading groups in the mountains for 20 years and decided it was time to retire from the “mountain business.” Since then, all of my outdoor activities—and there are many—have been solo ventures. But I retain fond memories of—and great respect for—Andover’s wonderful program.


It describes the experience of three young men who had signed up to see whether they could overcome their fear of heights.

When it came time to rappel, she says, the boys expressed a sense of urgency: “Tie me down—NOW!” they said as they stepped onto the balcony. The first two made it down with the group’s help, but the third, despite his best attempt to initiate the descent, stood in tears for 20 minutes. The next day he returned for another shot and immediately lowered himself over the edge.

Thousands of students and faculty have made their mark on S&R throughout the past five decades, and the program has been shepherded by passionate directors: Pieh, Smith, Barry Crook, Henningsen, Henry Wilmer ’63, Goetze, Ed Germain, and Christopher Shaw ’78. [And now Mark Cutler, who took the reins in 2003. Ed.] In 1978, the family of now Trustee George Ireland ’74 created an endowment that saved S&R from extinction by detaching it from the purse strings of the Academy. Likewise, the Abbot Academy Association has funded training for faculty, installation of challenge course elements, and construction of a climbing wall named in honor of Josh Miner that has reinvigorated campus-wide interest in rock climbing.

Evolving but Not Wavering

What is it that continues to draw students into courses like S&R in the 21st century? For Sally Manikian ’00, now backcountry specialist for the Appalachian Mountain Club, it was the opportunity to be outside of the standard Andover environment, with people who valued quirks and suspended judgment. “It was that I often returned to my dorm slightly dirty and sometimes bruised from the bumps and scrapes of climbs,” Manikian says. “It was that the way of leading came...
naturally to me, a facilitative leadership whereby you set up scenarios for the success of others in pursuit of a greater whole. It was the fact that our time together was spent amid trees, open air, and silence.”

Anna Harrison ’13 found that “being able to push my limits and make decisions under pressure has made me a much more confident and successful person and student.” Now in her second year at Georgia Tech, she is serving as an outdoor instructor, building on many of the skills she acquired as an S&R participant and Outdoor Pursuits student leader.

In 2010, S&R adopted the more descriptive name of Outdoor Pursuits to reflect modern trends and Academy initiatives, and updated its mission statement:

*In Outdoor Pursuits, students are encouraged to push their limits both physically and mentally in a variety of outdoor settings, while honing their skills in leadership, teamwork, environmental stewardship, and global citizenship. In the tradition of Kurt Hahn, we seek to learn while doing, and develop ourselves and each other not just for the outdoors but also through the outdoors.*

While no longer offering many of the quintessential S&R activities, Outdoor Pursuits has remained true to its foundational precepts in the Hahnian vein and continues to impact students’ lives in meaningful ways. The program has stepped up its commitment to leadership development with a fully integrated Senior Outdoor Leadership Opportunity (S.O.L.O.), in which student veterans of Outdoor Pursuits engage as colleagues with faculty instructors to plan and execute Outdoor Pursuits activities. Two outdoor leadership awards are offered to S.O.L.O. participants and rising seniors, including the Barron Family Outdoor Leadership Award, which extends a full scholarship to participate in a Hurricane Island Outward Bound School course. Award recipients are immersed in the principles of expeditionary learning in the wild and return to Andover with the credentials to infuse aspects of that philosophy back into Outdoor Pursuits and other leadership opportunities at the Academy.

**MOVING FORWARD**

Miner opened the door to new ways of thinking about educating the whole student when he brought The Break to Andover. As Henningsen surmises, “Today’s Outdoor Pursuits is worlds different from the S&R I took as a student and directed as a young faculty member but is no less successful for that difference.” Expeditionary learning is a modality that PA is now willing to embrace on a larger scale, as evidenced by a resurgence of global programming, the launch of the Tang Institute, and a new Strategic Plan that has some distinct similarities to Hahn’s 10 principles (see above). As Andover seeks innovative means of teaching and learning in the 21st century, let us embrace the past as we anticipate the future and prepare our students to be expeditionary thinkers and doers.

Mark Cutler, a PA faculty member since 2003, recently launched an interdisciplinary course rooted in Outdoor Pursuits with colleague Christine Marshall-Walker (see page 15). Along with teaching Spanish and directing Outdoor Pursuits, Cutler is also a house counselor in Fess House and codirects the HUACA Project in Peru. He and wife Melanie have two daughters and a large dog.

**KURT HAHN’S 10 PRINCIPLES of EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING**

1. The primacy of self-discovery
2. The having of wonderful ideas
3. The responsibility for learning
4. Empathy and caring
5. Success and failure
6. Collaboration and competition
7. Diversity and inclusion
8. The natural world
9. Solitude and reflection
10. Service and compassion