

When I moved to Charleston a little over a year ago, I didn't know a single person in West Virginia (beyond those I'd met at interview day). My family was back in Colorado, where I grew up, and friends from college were scattered coast-to-coast.

Over the past twelve months, though, I've watched West Virginia become a home, and I've been fortunate enough to welcome my parents, sister, Colorado friends, and college friends as visitors to the Mountain State on various occasions.

Mid-June, my worlds converged when friends from Colorado, Maine, and Montana all road-tripped in for a West Virginia vacation. We stayed at a cozy little Airbnb on top of a mountain at the end of a long and winding country road about 20 minutes from Hinton.

During our daily outdoor excursions, I introduced them to places I'd previously discovered and fallen in love with on my own. I got to fall in love with West Virginia all over again as I watched them experience the state for the first time.

None of my friends had come with a negative perception of West Virginia per se, but they were certainly familiar with some of the less-than-flattering stereotypes that exist. I think being here in person, they were able to finally, fully understand the affection I've developed for it.

By far the best part of our vacation—and perhaps one of the most memorable parts of my entire year—was meeting up with my Charleston friends for a hike at the New River Gorge. In that moment, so many disparate threads came together: high school met college met post-grad adult life, and Colorado met Boston (where I went to college) met West Virginia.

West Virginia is as important a piece in my story as any of the other places I've lived, worked, volunteered, or studied. Maybe even more so. It's the location of my first full-time job, my first apartment, my first year figuring out how to be something other than a student. Figuring out how to be a real, self-sufficient, adult human.

The fellowship has especially helped me out in that regard. It's shown me that my quality of life and ability to contribute meaningfully to my community depend not on my professional achievements alone, or on the total number of volunteer hours I've put in, or on how many state parks I've checked off the list, but on finding some kind of balance between all of these things.

West Virginia is not just a bridge between my past and future—it's a place where I'm learning, living, loving, and growing *right now*. Standing there overlooking the New River Gorge with friends from every stage of my life by my side, I understood this and was so, immensely grateful. ♥