



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
TUESDAY, AUGUST 29, 2006

For more information, contact:
Mandi Semple, Alumni and Public Relations Coordinator
The Athenian School
2100 Mt. Diablo Scenic Boulevard
Danville, CA 94506
Phone: 925-362-7212
Email: mandi.semple@athenian.org

LIVING IN A.W.E.—THE ATHENIAN WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS COMPLETE 25-DAY TRIP TO THE HIGH SIERRAS

The Athenian Wilderness Experience (AWE) is a 25-day trek in the wilderness that is a graduation requirement for all students of The Athenian School, a distinctive San Francisco Bay Area college preparatory day and boarding school recognized for its innovative, challenging curriculum and unique programs. This past Sunday, August 27, incoming members of the senior class, who were away at AWE in the High Sierras since August 3, returned home to Athenian during the traditional event called “Run-In.” Students completed this decades-long Athenian school tradition of the AWE journey with an eight-mile run back to campus, where they were reunited with friends and family. Dick Bradford, Academic Dean and Head of Athenian’s Upper School (grades 9 through 12), likens the Athenian Wilderness Experience to the journeys depicted in Greek mythology, including the travels of Odysseus in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. AWE serves as a rite of passage, and Run-In symbolically and literally marks the return from the journey, which provides the traveler with both physical and mental challenges, offering opportunities for introspection and learning. Bradford explains, “We like to think of it as the heroes coming home.”

As a graduation requirement, AWE is usually completed at the end of the junior year or the start of the senior year, and it takes place during spring vacation in Death Valley or during the summer in the Sierra Nevada mountains. AWE includes extensive backpacking, navigation, first aid, low-impact camp craft, technical rock climbing, rappelling, peak ascents, natural history, a solo experience, and service. Students focus on promoting leadership, fellowship/teaming abilities, improving physical well-being, recognizing and acting upon individual strengths and weaknesses, and appreciating the natural environment.

Opportunities abound to develop human interactive skills by sharing responsibilities, making group decisions, taking care of one another, and realizing personal potential. The AWE journey normally lasts 25 days and consists of a two-week period of traveling within a small group of about ten students, as well as a three-day solo period for each student.

AWE began at Athenian in the fall of 1969, four years after the School's founding by Dyke Brown in 1965. Dyke envisioned a school with the goal of Periclean Athens—the full development of each citizen. Intellectual growth, fitness of character, commitment to humane values, aesthetic sensitivity, and readiness for adult citizenship and leadership are Athenian's objectives for each student. The Athenian Wilderness Experience was a groundbreaking program at its inception in the mid-sixties.

The roots of AWE lie in the Outward Bound program, which is designed to build self-confidence, physical strength, teamwork, and an appreciation for nature through experiences such as backpacking, rock climbing, kayaking, and mountaineering. The philosophy of Outward Bound is divided into four categories: Challenge and Adventure, Compassion and Service, Character Development, and Social and Environmental Responsibility.

Outward Bound was founded by Kurt Hahn, a German man who also ran the high school that Athenian's founder, Dyke Brown, attended. Kurt Hahn was one of the 20th century's most influential educators. He said, "I regard it as the foremost task of education to insure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self denial, and above all, compassion." He believed that outdoor education offered opportunities to teach and develop all of these qualities.

Influenced by Outward Bound and the philosophies of its co-founder, Kurt Hahn, Dyke contracted with Outward Bound, and Athenian became the first high school in the United States—public or private—to include the full Outward Bound program into its curriculum. In 1978, Athenian brought this program in-house to make it more specific to high school students and named it the Athenian Wilderness Experience—or AWE. Given what AWE is geared to accomplish and provide for each student, the Athenian Wilderness Experience is the ideal environment for each student to learn and develop within themselves the traits and characteristics that Dyke had originally believed in when he founded The Athenian School.

Athenian graduate and Diablo resident Sarah Day (Class of 2005), comments "AWE is a graduation requirement at Athenian, and one that shapes Athenian life from the youngest sixth grader to the most experienced senior. For most students, AWE is the most physically and emotionally intense experience in

their high school career. In the three weeks spent on the course, they do everything from learning to cook to rock climbing to spending three days in complete solitude.”

This High Sierra AWE trip also marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. At the end of the 2005-06 school year, Arlene Ustin, who had been Director of the Athenian Wilderness Experience for 27 years, retired from Athenian. Phoebe Dameron and Jason Ham, who have both participated in AWE trips with Arlene in the past and possess much wilderness experience, are the two new Co-Directors of AWE and led the August 2006 trip to the High Sierras. The Death Valley trip is scheduled to begin in March 2007.

While the course itself has undergone many changes over the years, the mission remains the same. Ustin says one of the most important aspects of AWE is in the unfamiliarity of the situations the students face on the course. “This is meant to cut through the social facades as fast as possible and then see what you discover, see how you thrive, see how you keep raising your standards.” She adds that AWE is “about pushing people, encouraging them, inviting them to go beyond their comfort zones. It’s not about traumatizing them, I’ve never believed in that. I always believed you need to start where the student is and bring them.”

Head of School Eleanor Dase comments on how impressed she has been by students’ tenacity in the face of the uncertain challenges of AWE—especially those students with health concerns such as diabetes, tendonitis, unstable body chemistry due to transplanted organs, and even missing limbs. These students often face not only their own fears, but those their peers and parents have for them. This makes AWE a unique experience for every student, one that gives to students as much as they bring to it.

ABOUT THE ATHENIAN SCHOOL: The Athenian School is a distinctive San Francisco Bay Area college preparatory school, providing an outstanding education that is challenging, engaging, personal, interactive and international. With 450 students in grades 6 to 12, Athenian’s 75-acre campus lies at the base of Mt. Diablo in Danville, 32 miles east of San Francisco. The student to faculty ratio is an enviable 10:1 and the average class size is 15 students. The Athenian School is fully accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges and the California Association of Independent Schools.

###