Hello, my name is Van, and I am a former AmeriCorps Member and current Service Intern at The Hub Cafe in Lewisburg, WV. I have been involved in High Rocks since 2010 when my dad started as an AmeriCorps member at High Rocks Academy. One of my first memories with High Rocks was hiking with a group of staff and AmeriCorps members including my dad. It was an incredibly impactful experience for me, and it ensured me as a lifelong member of the High Rocks. I have been a participant of High Rocks in some capacity at several different levels: I have attended both camps, worked as a Junior Counselor for New Beginnings (our first camp), helped build The Hub in its new (and current) location, worked as a student barista at The Hub, served as an AmeriCorps member for a summer at camp and began a year-long service term at The Hub before being terminated and transferred into a service intern position. That sounds like a lot, but each experience with High Rocks has truly shaped me both professionally and personally.

To give a little more info about my service, The Hub started as the center for High Rocks in Greenbrier County. It hosted various activities and programs for High Rocks such as homework help, free meals after school for students, free Wi-Fi and computer access, and a safe community. Since then, we have evolved into a space for our Cafe and Tech Express entrepreneurships, both of which provide an “earn-and-learn" program to allow students starting at age 14 to get meaningful job experience in a restaurant or technical space. I grew up watching The Hub being built as a branch of High Rocks. I’ve been a patron, a student barista and manager, AmeriCorps Member, and now a service intern with a focus of Community Outreach and Event Organization. This position has given me the ability to work on interesting and exciting projects and build my experience as a professional.

For example, one thing I’ve had the pleasure of working on during my current position at The Hub is Song School, a weekly workshop to help participants of all ages and experience levels to write, perform, and produce their own music. It was originally started by Judith Avers, a now long-time friend of mine, and I attended the workshops at an early age, building my skills as an artist. I’ve always known how difficult it is to make a career in music and the arts in general, but taking over Song School has allowed me to gain experience in teaching interesting subjects for aspiring and skilled artists, something I never expected to do freshly out of college and be paid a living stipend. I figured I would be spending my time working retail or fast food trying to sustain myself while I work on my music and art as a hobby, but High Rocks is allowing me to earn while doing more of what I’ve always wanted to focus on. My living stipend has allowed me to provide for myself while also saving up for my future, and the education award I received as an AmeriCorps is allowing me to pay off my student debt, giving me the chance to go into the professional world with far less financial stress than I would have without High Rocks.

Along with financial compensation, my time with High Rocks has taught me and continues to teach me valuable lessons regarding our “four pillars” of learning, leadership, health, and community. I have learned great skills in customer service, creativity in culinary settings, how to organize and lead workshops and events, time management skills, and more all from just serving at The Hub. I have become a great leader for various projects, I received Food Handler’s training at no cost to me, and I have been able to be deeper in the community all thanks to High Rocks. This is not including all the knowledge I have gained from the other programs I’ve had the privilege of participating in; each of our programs is a well of experience and valuable life lessons going towards development in the workplace and individual lives.

High Rocks was started by a powerful woman who then passed her leadership onto her daughter who has since shared this organization with her children. I am fortunate to have been part of my own generational path from my father when he started his journey with High Rocks. I know many other people in High Rocks who have shared it with their children who will likely share it with their children and on. In Appalachia especially, generational pathways have been an integral part of our families and culture, but this typically comes in the form of farming, mining, or factory work. It has been so rewarding to see the birth of a new generational pathway that exists in so many forms from education to leadership in culinary and technical spaces to managerial work and more.

I feel honored to have been and continue to be a part of this organization, and I could not imagine my life without High Rocks. The community and programs have all been so deeply intertwined in my life and have built me as a person. High Rocks has allowed me to grow exponentially, pushing me to further education after high school and continuing to take care of me after I’ve graduated college. I learn more from my experiences in my workspace every day, and I stay excited to learn. High Rocks will always be part of me, and I could not be more grateful for that.