

Transcript: Episode 6: Outdoor Adventure Guide Casey Graham

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Hello and welcome to the Above the Rest podcast, a podcast all about the 10th Force Support Squadron at the Air Force Academy. I'm your host, Taylor Burnfield, and for this episode, I interviewed Casey Graham, who is an adventure guide for the outdoor adventure program at the academy. Outdoor Adventure has several upcoming programs for the winter season, so be sure to tune in to find out about everything they have to offer.

Well, thank you for coming up to the studio today.

Yeah, thanks for having me out.

So, you work with the outdoor adventure program?

Yep.

And how long have you been with them?

I've been at USAFA with that program since January of 2013.

Okay.

Before that, I was at Peterson's adventure program for a couple years as well.

And how did you get involved in this career field?

Um, I went to school for outdoor adventure education and um, the end of that degree program was a pretty significant internship program that I had to complete. And at the time there was a great uh, internship out over at Fort Carson's MWR. And so that's kind of how I got into military rec in the first place. and through that made a bunch of different uh connections here in town and um yeah a bunch of friends at at the various outdoor recs and um couple years later I was offered a full-time position at Peterson and then that springboarded into USAFA.

And do you have a military background?

Uh I don't. No.

Okay.

Yeah. I'm a civilian. Always been a civilian DoD employee.

And so with USAFA, what sets their outdoor adventure program from other programs?

Yeah, it's kind of a tricky one because uh every every program has its, you know, its advantages based on its location and population and all that kind of stuff. I think what we really uh excel with here in Colorado and at USAFA is really utilizing our natural resources to our benefit. So, you know, we have a lot of mountain based activities, uh, river-based activities, um, and some really good, uh, you know, family-based activities as well. Just having the city right here with a ton of those really fun kind of less expensive resources, too. Uh, I think one of the things that sets us apart here in town is that, uh, and just in in services in general, um, we're the only program that employs licensed mountain guides for those mountain activities. And we put a really really high premium on our uh on our training processes for our staff to make sure that everybody coming out on a program is getting, you know, at or above the the same level of uh professionalism that they would expect from a really, you know, highbrow outdoor adventure style program um from the commercial sector. Um obviously, you know, much less expensive than the commercial sector, but uh we don't think that that should uh detract from the quality that people get.

Yeah. And you mentioned the training that the guides have. What type of training do they have?

Whatever activity it is that they are leading. Uh they have that professional skill set and credentialing. So if they're a raft guide, you know, most of our raft guides are Royal Gorge certified um licensed Colorado raft guides. Uh many of them are guide instructors as well uh and have swiftwater rescue uh qualifications through the American Canoe Association. If they're a mountain uh ops person, then it it kind of varies on what it is they're doing, but they operate within the scope uh scope of practice from the American Mountain Guides Association for that. And so, uh, we have, you know, everything from single pitch instructors that'll take you out for some great beginner trips all the way up to licensed international mountain guides that can take you to Europe if you want to go and go ski there. But ultimately, uh, you know, folks with not just credentialing, but also a great deal of experience to back that up.

Uh, so they understand how to how to meet folks where they're at in terms of their skill levels that they're coming in with.

What programs does Outdoor Adventure have coming up for the winter?

For the winter, we are really stacked with a lot of um we've got backcountry skiing programs. We have resort uh ski programs as well where we'll drive people up for the day and um give them discounted rentals, things like that. Uh we've got avalanche education courses. Uh we're the only uh accredited program in the DoD to offer avalanche education um courses for uh kind of you know the broader customer base, not just military training. Um and um we've also got a lot of ice climbing programs, day programs, weekend programs. We have a great kids camp coming up through uh December break. And uh that's a week-long uh uh camp over that second week of that break where we'll get kids out, you know, ice climbing and uh and tubing and building snow shelters and all that kind of stuff, too. So, those are some of the big things that we've got coming up as well as a ski and soak weekend up at Monarch and Princeton Hot Springs. So, that'll be pretty fun, too.

And how can people sign up for those trips if they're interested?

Yeah, they can just give us a shout in the office. um and uh and check the website for our our most current um offerings. They can also look us up on social media. We often put out, you know, uh kind of, you know, little promotions and things like that throughout the season. Uh and and we also post a bunch of our photos from our trips, too, so they folks can get an idea of what it is that we're doing out there and what's included and things like that.

And what is your social media? You have Instagram and Facebook.

Yep. And we're just OAP.

Okay.

Yeah.

And what do you all have in the spring and summer? Have you planned that far ahead yet?

Yeah, we're usually planned, you know, at least nine months out, uh if not a year sometimes. So, uh for the spring, we have uh raft guide training that comes up. We're always looking for great volunteers to

come out if they want to, you know, get trained up. And we hire, you know, we hire folks for the summer as well. Um but we'll put them through the process usually in April.

Um, we do a lot of ski mountaineering up on Pikes Peak. We're one of the very few permit holders to to be able to guide on Pikes Peak. Uh, so we do that through, you know, March, April, and May generally is when the snow is holding up there. Um, super fun programs, really easy right here in town on our on our backyard 14er. Uh, you know, and then once the summer really kicks off, it's it's rafting, whitewater rafting, class 3 to five, you know, family-friendly to really high adventure class, uh, through the Royal Gorge and Big Horn Sheep Canyon. We do kayaking programs. We do kids camps. We do, um, you know, just straight up hikes in some pretty beautiful locations. And then a lot of rock climbing as well, which is a, you know, pretty fantastic uh, uh, activity here in Colorado to take advantage of.

Mhm. If someone was interested in becoming a guide for outdoor adventure, how would they go about doing that?

Yeah, I think emailing us just at USAFAoap@gmail.com um would be a good start. Uh so that way we could figure out where folks would like to to get training and what types of activities they wanted to get involved with. We do, like I said, have a pretty high bar for professionalism in our guide staff. And so we make sure that folks have all of the professional credentialing that they need and uh and the experience to back all of that up too. So that's those are the things that we'd want to see from somebody trying to come in to at least get a paid guiding position.

We also have a lot of volunteer opportunities like I said through the the raft guide um program specifically. And um that stuff, you know, we'll we'll take folks in, we'll train them here in house. we, you know, make them drink the Kool-Aid for the for the outdoor rec community here and then, um, they get to ride the river all all season long with us, which is really fun. Um, and, uh, but yeah, for for some of our other programs, you know, we're always looking for drivers. Uh, we have a really big mountain bike program as well, uh, for downhill biking. Uh, again, one of the few, uh, programs that can take people down the Pikes Peak Highway, which is a really fun trip. And we're always looking for volunteers and guides for that type of stuff as well. So you don't have to be super technically competent with with all of the mountain stuff necessarily. You can you can come in and help out in that capacity initially and then start working your way up towards other things if you want.

And do you all pay for their training if someone comes in and they are interested in being a guide or for some of it?

So so we do collect a training fee for the raft guide training. it's fairly minimal when when you put it into the scope of 10 weeks of or 10 weekends of training that you're out on the river. Um, as far as other training, once folks are on payroll or they're an official volunteer for us in some capacity, we often offer a lot of those trainings inhouse. So, you know, swift water is free, first aid CPR is free. Um, you know, our single pitch instructor courses uh through the AMGA that we offer here in house. We often cover that either in totality or at least everything except the membership fees. So that that way it's it's way more accessible. Um yeah, so we offer a lot of those types of opportunities. And then ongoing mentorship as well is is a big tenant of our of our uh staff.

What is your favorite part about your job?

My favorite part probably the the places I get to go with the people that I get to go um to them with. Yeah, we we we have a really great community of uh of folks that come out for a lot of programs and um one of the the you know real advantages of being a a guide is that the folks that you work with are not just clients, they often turn into friends as well. Uh and so, you know, that's that's a pretty a pretty special uh place to be in your career, I think, when when the folks that that you work with the most are also, you know, part of your part of your friend community. So, we get to see them a lot. Um, and then the places we go are just, you know, incredible. Um, Colorado is just stacked with so many cool day trips to, you know, to explore and and Um, and then the stuff that we do, you know, outside of Colorado for, you know, a lot of our custom programs and trainings. I mean, we we'll go to Japan this winter again and um you know, we've we've been in Europe a number of times and probably go back this summer and you know, I've taken folks up to Alaska before and and all over the Southwest. We do a Grand Canyon trip with uh Fort Tuttle, you know, every summer now, which is a really incredible experience, too. And um yeah, there's just there's so much to experience out here and so many folks that seem to be stoked about So, it's it's a pretty fun uh fun way to spend, you know, a workday for sure.

What is your favorite place that you've traveled through USAFA outdoor adventure?

Oo, that's a tough one. Yeah. Um I don't know that I have a favorite one to be honest. uh you know the the the trips that that we get to get to take folks to they all kind of have their own uh character and and their own you know kind of just yeah special um place there. I mean again like heli skiing in Alaska was pretty amazing right? Um powder skiing in in Japan was you know bucket list item right? Um, and uh, to be able to like go back to those places, you know, with some regularity and and develop those communities uh, is is is pretty great. Um, honestly, you know, I think some of my favorite trips have been up here on Pikes Peak locally. I think it's it it's a pretty um, underappreciated 14er in terms of outdoor recreation. Uh in terms of like other 14ers, you know, you hear a lot about like Long's Peak and and Quandry and uh you know, Pikes has a highway that goes to the top of it. It's pretty amazing. alpine access, you know, and you know, you can drive for 20 minutes and be above tree line and then be able to go and and climb some really cool thing in an amazing position or ski this beautiful, you know, thousand ft essentially blue square style line um you know down to the to the road and then go get a donut. like it's a it's a pretty unique experience in a really beautiful place and like you know a half day trip right outside your back door.

So yeah, if someone had never been skiing or mountain biking or rock climbing, do you all offer beginner courses to teach people how to do those things?

Yeah, great question. Most of our trips are, you know, what we call zero to hero. So, like you don't need any experience and especially if it's one of our our weekend trips, we get you to a spot where you feel pretty, you know, pretty empowered and pretty um uh you know, you know, pretty skillful with with those basic skill sets. Um the one exception is probably our backcountry ski trips. you do need to to be a competent skier or snowboarder um to engage with that just because backcountry snow is much much different than uh the snow that you get on the resorts. And so we want to make sure that just you know folks aren't going to get hurt, you know, twist and knee, that type of stuff. So we want to make sure folks are competent at riding for those programs. So that would be our our backcountry skiing and our avalanche programs. But um everything else, you know, ice climbing, rock climbing, like we take folks from never ever never put a harness on. I've never even seen a climbing rope, right? all the way up to, you know, I I we were just in Vegas um working with Nellis Air Force Base and I had a a client who had come through a beginner course with me maybe 10 years ago and

now he you know, he's climbing 13 pitch, you know, 2,000 foot rock routes with me, you know, it's um so we can take folks all the way up and and teach him a lot of a lot of those skills in the middle as well. Um, I think it's a it's a a tenant of of American kind of like go get itism, right, where it's like we want to learn how to do it ourselves. And I think that's great. So that's that's what our our program really focuses on is not just getting people out for some of this stuff, but teaching them how to be able to do it independently if they want in the future as well.

Have you ever had a client who was a beginner and then they eventually became a guide?

Yeah.

Okay.

Yeah, we have a couple actually on staff.

Yeah. Um, a lot of our raft guide staff started that way. You know, they came out with uh with their boy scout troop or their squadron or or something like that and uh you know, maybe they did that for a couple of seasons, you know, their families and had a great time and decided like, hey, this would be a great, you know, weekend warrior style, you know, activity to be able to do. So, a lot of our raft guide staff kind of meets that um that description. Um, you know, and and yeah, a good chunk of our our climbing folks have have kind of, you know, come through that way as well. they they did maybe a single pitch instructor course to start down that professional pathway or maybe maybe an airy uh you know an area 1 avalanche course. Uh and from that they you know they caught the bug and just wanted to to pursue more and more education and mentorship and get better and better at their craft and and then you know eventually they came back and and we hired them on. So yeah that's awesome.

Do you have a favorite um activity that you enjoy guiding or do you like them all equally?

I like pretty much everything that I do. Skiing is definitely the thing that that pokes up more than anything else. If I could ski 12 months out of the year, I would. But um my wife would probably be upset about that because I'd have to go to another hemisphere. So big thing is uh with the winter programs coming up, you know, we've got some great trips. We are usually, you know,

25 to 50% less expensive than the commercial option for a lot of these same types of programs. And you know, I think another big advantage that we have in our program is we outfit folks with everything they need. So, you know, if you were to go out to a you know, ex mountain guides and and do a you know, a backcountry ski course or an ice climbing course, you'd probably have to rent a bunch of gear as well and then drive yourself up there and all that kind of stuff. We generally provide transportation in our govs as well as outfit you with all the gear you need and uh and we kind of walk you through that whole process too and and provide some discounts on things that maybe we can't provide too. Um so I think that's something to kind of just remember for folks and um yeah uh signups are open for the whole winter and we do a lot of custom trips if folks want to you know just come out and have their own private group. Um, we try to keep those at the same pricing and uh, yeah, we're we're always on board for that stuff.

All right. Well, thank you so much for coming in today and talking with us.

Awesome. Thanks, Taylor.

Thanks.

Thank you again for listening and be sure to stay up to date on everything happening at the support squadron on our website usafasupport.com and our various social media profiles on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube.