

Interview conducted 23 April 2021 at the GS NorCal building in San Jose

Can you just state your name and what you do for Girl Scouts?

Absolutely. So my name is Eliz Adem. At Girl Scout camp, we go by camp names. So my nickname is Apple. And at Girl Scouts I am the director of program design, meaning I create and design the programs that we deliver to girls across the council.

How did you pick your camp name?

Yeah, so I was 14 years old, and I went I was a counselor-in-training at Camp Skylark Ranch when I was 14. And I wanted to be a teacher one day, and I wanted to work in education. So I picked the camp name Apple, for like, the symbol of education for teachers. I wanted something that was easy for kids to remember and easier than my legal name to pronounce. So that was also a prerequisite for me.

So you mentioned that you picked it when you were CIT. Could you kind of tell me like your camp story? So like when you started going to camp through now?

Yeah, yeah, of course. So I grew up in Sunnyvale. And I was a girl scout and I had gone camping with my girl scout troop. My family does not do the outdoors at all. They never have. But I had never gone to camp until I was 14. And the only reason I went was because my family lives in the UK. And every summer as a kid, we go to the UK during the summer. And then one year we did not go and so my mom was like you're not sitting at home all day. And so she signed me up to be CIT at Skylark ranch. And it kind of started from there. I never would have imagined that I would still be involved like 15, 16, 17 years later, it feels really surreal at some points. So I went to school to be a teacher. And so all throughout college I worked as a camp counselor. And then because I was a teacher, it fit very well with my summer schedule. And I had worked both at Camp Skylark Ranch and then on the administrative team at Camp Sugar Pine, our sister Girl Scout camp. I was getting antsy teaching because I wanted to be able to, like mentor young people, as opposed to teach. And it kind of just it went from there in terms of I was hoping to switch careers and then the Skylark Ranch position opened up and here I am almost four years later.

So you mentioned Camp Sugar Pine, can you kind of describe the setup of the camps that we have?

Yes, absolutely. So we have four properties. We have camp Skylark Ranch in the Santa Cruz Mountains, Camp Hidden Falls just south of Los Gatos in the mountains there, Camp Sugar Pine in the Sierras and Camp Bothin in Marin County and all of our camps serve girls either from first

grade or second grade through grade 12. And there is something for every girl. Our program has lots of varieties of activities, some for beginner campers where the housing is inside like at Camp Bothin, girls that like tent tent camping sleeping under the stars, but I would say the two things that are really consistent among our properties and camp experiences is the sense of community that camp provides for girls of all ages, as well as the positive role models that we have during our summertime season.

So can you describe like what makes Skylark in particular unique?

Yes. Oh, gosh, you know, people ask me that all the time. And I would say the thing that makes Skylark ranch unique is, I feel it's very much intertwined with the location. We're very lucky in California to have lots of biodiversity. But I feel like when you drive on to Skylark Ranch, there's a long road right from the beach. And you're kind of thinking, "What is this place? Like, how can there possibly be a camp somewhere over here?" And the road is very long, very windy, one way. And then I think when you get there, and you see that, like we are among the redwood trees, it just feels like home. And I would say that one thing that I really enjoy about camp Skylark Ranch is that we have our alumni network or so people that have attended camp Skylark or have worked there are very much still in touch with each other from yours throughout.

Can you kind of describe the community? Like you were mentioning the alumni network?

So I would say there's a lot of different ways that we could describe the community, I would say, very much, you know, from almost like hard skills in terms of love the outdoors, love to be outside. I would say that one really unique thing is that we're all - even though some of us have been there at different times - we all have stories about being in the same place. So stargazing in Chapel Hill, riding horses, hiking, inspiration point, all of those things, generations have have experienced that. And I know that is that is also true for other for other camps as well, but I think that the caring community and the dedication to getting girls outdoors really, really touches me, it's nice to see.

Can you tell me like your favorite camp memory?

Yeah, I do have a lot, but I have one that stands out to me. So this was probably like nine or 10 years ago, and I was a counselor for the second and third graders. So they're entering second grade, so they're still pretty little. And it was for a program that we have called mermaids lagoon. And in mermaids Lagoon, we take a hike to the beach, and is three miles from the mountain top to the beach. And that hike was so long, it took us so long. All of us trying to make it to the beach. But I think the highlight of that was all the bananas slugs, we counted and stopped at every single banana slug and I think we saw like 52 or something that day. It just was really fun. We were just like singing lots of songs. And when we got to the beach, we actually didn't have

that much time left, because we had spent most of the day getting there. But it still felt like something that the girls would probably remember looking back at their camp experience.

How has camp impacted your life?

It's almost like how it hasn't impacted my life! I would say because of camp, I am the person I am today. Because of Girl Scouts, I am the person today. Camp has made me a strong person. It's made me resilient. It's made me do things I didn't know I could do. It has brought together people from all over the world. When I've gone to the UK or Turkey and the past few years, I've I visited camp staff there from past years and it's just really cool that even though we haven't seen or talked to each other in like five years, we can sit down and have a meal together like no time has passed. So that sense of sisterhood I really love it.

Can you describe how you first heard that Skylark may have been in danger of the fire?

Absolutely. So I had just finished leading Tajar's Treehouse, our summer virtual camp program at the end of July, beginning of August in 2020. And I had just begun my week off, it was my first time I was taking week off. And just like when normal, everything always happens when the camp director is off somewhere. I had not gone anywhere, because I was it was COVID. So I was just like, at home. And I remember two things, I remember being really annoyed that there's this huge heatwave during my week off, because it was just so hot. And then I also remember hearing the lightning and the thunder one night, which was so so unusual for this area, at least for me, in my experience. And in the news, you know, they were talking about all these lightning forecasts, you know, fire warning, the heat, etc. And then I woke up and I received text messages from our site manager who had shared with me that him and his family had evacuated safely. So after that, I had the news on I had my laptop open, I had tracking all sorts of different maps and news, etc. And I was in touch with the other camp directors that were also in the Pescadero area. There are a handful of camps and we were like messaging each other like when we heard something new and like sharing resources with each other. And I was very much in touch with my supervisor and our chief officer that is oversees all the properties. And it became very apparent quickly. I would say, within the first 24 or 36 hours, that the question had moved from was Skylark affected to how much of Skylark Ranch was affected. On the maps, we were dead in the burn area. That was all speculation. We didn't know anything. So we were speculating that how much of Skylark Ranch has been affected. I was speaking with the neighbors that live in the community on White House Canyon Road, and you know, we're all trying to figure out what's going on. And then I saw that night on the news, White House Canyon, the camp road, a portion of it was on the news, and there were firefighters there and it so it was like "Okay, okay" this is getting more real, it's getting more real. And then from there, it honestly was a waiting game for five days, probably even a week longer than that. And it was just full of speculation going on Google Maps, checking callfire. Twitter proved to be the most reliable resource and the most up

to date. And it felt strange not being able to do anything, just like sitting in my home and just watching things unfold and not really being able to help in any way. I remember being very grateful because a week before August 16 when the CZU fire started, I had been at Skylark Ranch for leisure, which was the first time I had been there for fun with no work obligations in a very long time. And I remember I got to go to Fern Grove, I hiked the ridge trail, ate lunch at inspiration point, and then relax in the meadow before heading home. So I also remember thinking, I'm really glad that that happened. And I got to do that, of course not knowing what was going to happen. And then when it was safe to go back to Skylark Ranch, our site rangers went and did an initial kind of just to see what they could see. It was so unsafe, so they were unable to really like you know, answer our questions about everything. And when it was safe, and they did go we learned that what was great news was that our dining hall and our office building were untouched, which was a relief because they are the biggest structures on our camp property. We also learned that the firefighters, the fire had come in hot at Skylark Ranch, and the firefighters were actually luckily for whatever reason, they were there. Not to like, they just have to be at Skylark Ranch. It wasn't like they were like out to save Skylark Ranch. Maybe they were we don't know, but they were there which is why they were able to protect those buildings. They were there for a few days otherwise I don't think we would have been that lucky. But all the cabins are gone for the most part. And the majority of them are new as of two, three years ago, like very brand new. So that was also very surreal. The bathrooms, it turns out when porcelain gets really hot, it explodes. So all the toilets had exploded. And there were holes where the toilets used to be. The water pipes had melted, the we the firefighters had used up all the water, which was great, and the pipes melted. So there was no water, there was no electricity. But I think the most jarring thing for me was seeing the the trees. It was very different. I mean, if you've been to the redwood trees, you know that it's very cold and very shady. And it was really strange to be able to see right through the forest everywhere I looked, and to have such hot sun coming through in places that I had never experienced having sunlight. So that is what I am the most sad about is that the skyline and the forest will not look the same, probably not in my lifetime. Yeah, it was very surreal.

Can you go over how you felt seeing Skylark burned down?

Well, it didn't feel like it was real. It felt like I had, I've been once only once and it was five or six weeks after the CZU fire. So probably the end of September, I want to say that was the only time I've been and it was shocking. I mean, you knew it wasn't going to be good because right when you're on highway one, and you turn to go up the camp road, all of the brush had burned. All of it. And you saw the mountains up ahead, and you just saw bare land. So I just felt like there was like a pit in my stomach. And getting there on the camp road, very woodsy, very foresty right when you almost get there, you can see through all the trees. And I remember seeing a deer which was wonderful to see I was like, "Oh, the animals are still here" but I could see the deer run for half a mile through the trees, which is unheard of. And it did not feel like the place I

remembered it to be. I remember stepping, when I actually physically got to site, it felt like something from a horror movie. In the sense of where the cabins went stood all that we're left with the metal bed frames and all just like debris everywhere, screws everywhere, nails everywhere, just walking around everywhere. I also remember feeling very grateful that camp was not in session because of COVID-19. Because if we had been running camp, it would have been a day at camp. So I also kept thinking I was like, wow, I'm very grateful that I did not have to evacuate 250 people. So I remember just being like very appreciative of that. I also remember having way more questions than we had answers to at that point, like when would we get electricity back? You know, how fast can we start to clean up the debris? I remember when I went back home later I was like, Oh, I wonder if that tree in the meadow burned down? Like things I had forgotten to really check for as I was like processing. But it's a long process. It is nowhere near over. But slowly I think we'll get there. But I It's definitely a long road road ahead. But through that time, I'm very grateful for community. I know I mentioned that earlier, but camp staff that I had worked with that I had not spoken to in a very long time, reached out to me on social media on email on my cell phone. And it was really overwhelming to receive all those messages. And I did not reply to them for quite some time, because I didn't know really what to say or what to do. But just knowing they were thinking of me meant a lot to me, as well.

So you mentioned you been once.

Yes.

That was the only time you've been?

Correct. That is the only time I've been. Our CEO Marina Park and our board member that oversees our property task group Ginger Bryant go about once a month just to see the growth, talk with the forester, and our site rangers are there every day doing work, so to check in with them. It is really unsafe to be there when I mean, this is news from this this past week, there was a quarter-acre of a fire at Skylark Ranch, the San Mateo County Calfire tweeted that there was a fire at Skylark Ranch. And what had happened was the roots of a redwood tree had been a light since August and eventually, the roots had burned up and it had emerged above the ground and that had started another fire. Fortunately, they were able to put it out within an hour. But that is not unusual. It's been about 16, 17, 18 times that this has happened to that burn region since August. The areas are still smoldering and redwood trees are strong and according to science, they could be still smoldering for another year or so and we don't even know it because we can't see it. Branches are everywhere, like everywhere. And they're they're constantly falling. Fortunately, but not unfortunately, we have not had a lot of rain. So that did prevent erosion from happening, which was a huge concern. But it also means that I'm very nervous for the summer and the possibility of more wildfires this summer is very real to me, considering how warm it's been and the lack of rain. Areas are still recovering. They're still smoldering from the summer.

When the fire occurred, what was the response from GS Norcal?

So we have a property two miles away in Pescadero, Camp Butano, which is also a property we own. And so the site Rangers and their families had to evacuate. So they did make sure the staff, their families, themselves had everything they needed, had food, you know, hygiene supplies, everything they needed, to ensure that they were safe once they had evacuated from camp. So that was the number one priority. And then after that we posted on our social media that like we don't know. You know, thanks for all the good wishes, let's hope for the best. And I think overall, we've done a really wonderful job being as transparent as we can be with our members. And as we received more information, we were able to share that with our girl scout members. And then once the initial visits had been done at Skylark Ranch, being able to share pictures and newsletters and on social media was also you know, we know everybody wants to know, it's their home too. So I think we did the best we could have done in terms of trying to keep up with everything, especially because everything seemed to change. You have to be careful in recognizing from trusted sources, right, what is actually facts versus speculation. So to make sure that doesn't get muddled up.

How did you see the Skylark Ranch community of alumni react to the fires?

I intentionally stayed off social media during this time, because for the whole week that I was supposed to be off I was watching the press conferences that launch at 6am and 6pm. And I was like, monitoring everything. And I was really just like, I know what I know. I don't have capacity for anything else. But I do remember that there's a Facebook group for alumni that had been sleepy and ever since then, during that moment, oh, my goodness, people were sharing stories. They were sharing memories. They were sharing silly stories. They were sharing camp songs. They were sharing their color camper tshirt, their color staff tshirt, their staff tie, their staff tie pins. And it was fun. It was really fun. And it was really fun to for me to to reflect and think about things that I had seen and done when I was 14 that are no longer something that we do at Camp Skylark. And I just remember feeling really grateful for this sisterhood that spanned across across the world.

So, as I mentioned, the majority of our cabins burned down. And the iconic canvas structure of the platform tents were gone. And all that were left were the metal bed frames, and the concrete blocks where the corners of the building of the cabins once stood. And it felt like a haunted house. There was Ash on the ground. The trees looked like notch sticks. There was just nothing there. And then to see these clumps of metal framed beds, where all the cabins once were. It was just, it was unreal. And I think something else that really struck me in terms of, we have a unit called Raven, and Raven was built by a group of dedicated Girl Scouts and Skylark Ranch volunteers in honor of one of their friends. It's relatively new to us. And it was special because it

had yurts and it had this beautiful gazebo, and we just put in a real bathroom there. And that was all gone. If you were to go, it's just flat. And all you see are like the concrete boxes where the structures once stood.

(Going over images of the fire damage)

So our forester shared with us that our the fire came in hot in Skylark Ranch, and the it was evident because the trees were burned 18 feet high. I mean, it was just like black. They're just charred all the way up and that was evident. There's photos of the cabins that had plastic at the top kind of like a, what do they call it, like a sun roof type of thing. The Plexiglas had melted. It's just so eerie. But something that was very interesting about fire, and I guess just nature in general, was there would be groves of trees for example, but right next to it, they were untouched, not charred, not black, nothing. So for whatever reason, the course of the fire and the way the wind was, and this was evident in one of our units, I believe it was Cardinal, all of them had been burned, the cabins have been burned. Except for one. I don't know why. But that's just what happened. In speaking with colleagues in the camp industry in the Santa Cruz County area, they had also experienced similar things at their camp. So that was also just like, wow, like, why did that last like, we'll never know.

I do want to share some pictures of some of the growth. Well, before and after pictures, I suppose. So, Fern Grove is a part of our camp. That is the definition of what coastal California outdoors looks like. The tall redwood trees, the ferns, there's a little creek with newts. It's freezing cold, because it's a grove of trees. And it has always been the most peaceful spot at camp, I know I have always loved going there. And it was very shocking to see that an area that had once been wooded, thick, thick, thick, thick, lush with ferns and trees was now very sparse. And as I mentioned, it's always cold there, because there's no sunlight because it's just a cool grove of trees. And the one time I've been I remember it was very warm there, which is the exact opposite experience. But I'm pleased to say that we do have photos of regrowth happening right away. So the redwood trees around camp have started fuzzing out. So it's when they they sprout new kind of new life so to speak. And they're called fuzzing out because they just look fuzzy and they're green. Fern Grove has ferns, we've seen banana slugs there, wild flowers there. Yeah, so it feels good to know that like the earth is doing what the earth knows how to do and kind of regrow, take care of itself, reset itself, even though it will be a long a long process. But it has been nice to see those images.

So we do have horses, the horses do not live on site. So they were they were not there when the CZU fire broke out. But this is a photo of what we call horse country. So where the horses were is where the stalls are, where our arenas are, and this is the view looking out from Chapel Hill. And you can see the mountains, the bear mountains when you look out. So usually you see trees like lots of trees, but you just see the dirt and like little little sticks. And it was really hard to take

a look at our tack shed that burned down. It was brand new, not even a year old. I didn't recognize the area. It looked different. I didn't recognize where the arenas were supposed to be. And I remember that being very shocking.

Throughout the winter months the regrowth seemed to taper out a bit. And we were like, "Oh, I wonder," you know "what happens." But then when we saw the wildflower flowers at camp, that felt that felt really good. Yeah, so it's just nice to know that the animals are still there, the squirrels are still there, the birds are still there, the deer are still there. But yeah, it's definitely different. And I remember when I was walking around, I would be like, there used to be a tree there. For example, like at the corner of the ropes course, there was this huge redwood tree. And it was no longer there. And in areas that were really burned, ash on the ground was thick. And you have to be careful where you step, you still do, because the tree had burned from top down into the roots and so there was just a hole. So your foot would sink into inches of ash that you thought was just like solid ground.

What does the environmental recovery look like at Skylark?

So I am not a scientist, and I am not a complete expert on property management, but I can share with you what I do know. I do know that it is a very long process, in terms of, we are still waiting for permits for to take out all the debris. So everything that you see, in the photos of all the debris, that's still there. The county goes section by section just like making sure it is safe for removal before people start to clean up and rebuild. The soil needs to settle. I'm not an expert, but I cannot imagine it would be a good idea to visit Fern Grove or other parts of camp for three, four or five years so that the plants can kind of get their roots down again so that it can not only regrow, but also like for safety purposes. We're not sliding around, there's not land falls, mud falls, things like that.

Will Skylark Ranch be able to hold camp again in the future?

Oh, gosh, I wish I had like a crystal ball. What I can share is, you know, there is a lot of uncertainty with that especially now that we've been in a pandemic for a year. But very much so we want the rebuild of Skylark, whatever that means, to be part of the experience of our campers. So we are looking to and hoping to, for the fall, have some sort of forest resilience programming for Girl Scouts to like learn more about the forest regrowth at the Skylark area specifically. Over the summer, I'm again directing Tajar's Treehouse to house our virtual camp program. And we will be having Restoration Thursdays where we learn with our girls about the forest and regrowth. And we would love, like a dream would be, to kind of have some sort of like Girl Scout Conservation Corps where we can like go rebuild and be part of the process that comes back together. And I trust that our leadership at Girl Scouts will make the best decisions for our

girls to ensure that whenever we go back, it will be safe. It'll be a safe and positive experience for everyone.

So is there anything else you'd like to share?

I just want to emphasize the community, the sisterhood, the people that have reached out to one another I think that speaks volumes of our girl scout program there. I'm just looking forward to seeing what comes next even though I know there be many things that come come come before we are finally in the clear.