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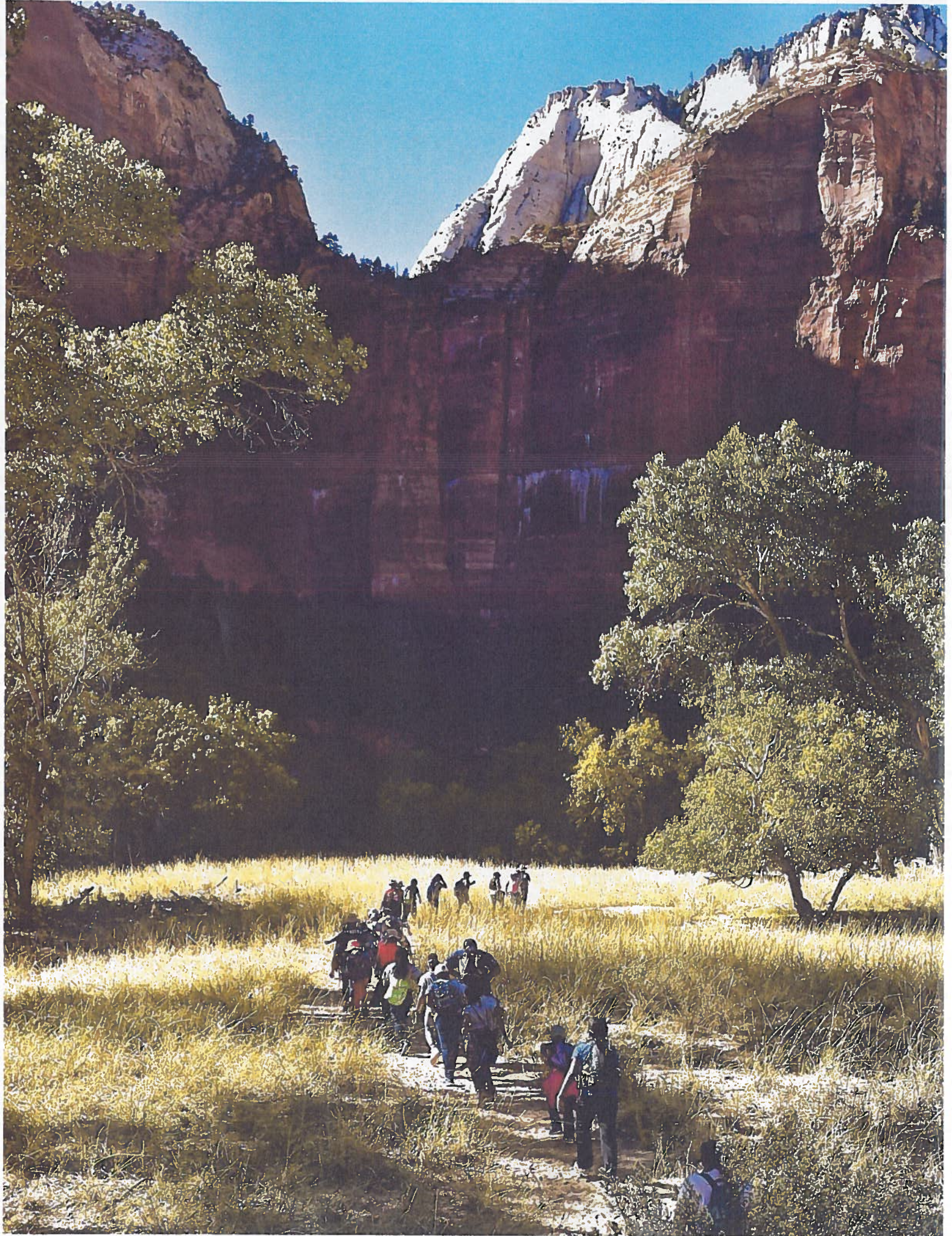


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Concrete to Canyons

Millions of people visit Zion National Park annually. Some are local. Most have traveled from afar. What lies within the park's 232 square miles is a landscape of towering, narrow gorges, remote mesas, and washes that lead to isolated canyons...canyons that reach up to 20 miles in length. The vast majority of those who visit the canyon partake of the 15 miles of paved trails. Zion's depths require time and experience to truly be explored.

Millions of people visit Las Vegas, Nevada annually. The epicenter of nightlife in the southwest. Embellished with towering hotels-casinos, gambling, shopping, dining, and the ongoing development of cultural venues, 'Vegas' is predominately a resort destination. Interstate 15 carves its way through the center of the city. Vegas is not without its challenges. Those who feel the struggle most are the children of the inner-city.

Only 160 miles separate Las Vegas from Zion, yet they are polar opposites. Yet something magical happened when the two cultures collided. 110 fifth grade students from the Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy (AACPA) in Las Vegas stood upon Zion's floor for the first time, awestruck in wonder.

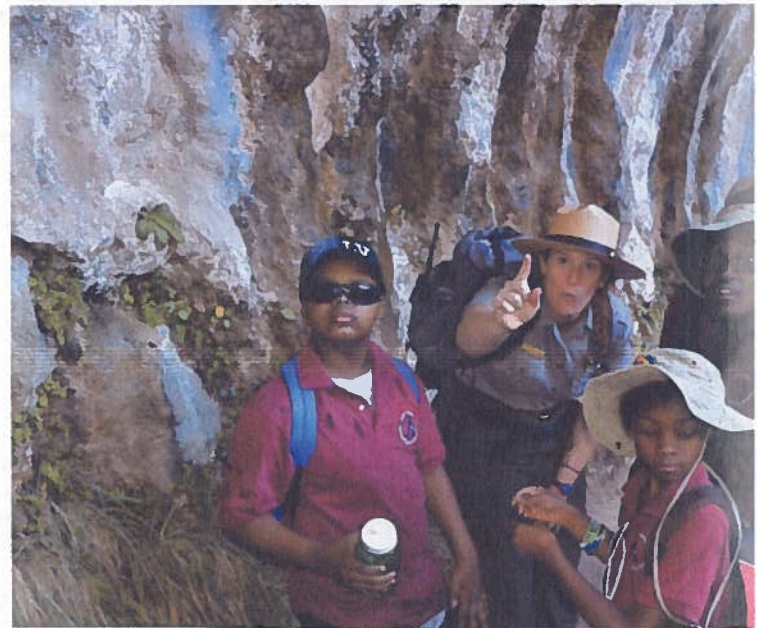
This was the first group of students from AACPA and Rainbow Dream Academy to experience the beauty of Zion. The students participated in what Zion National Park calls, "Concrete to Canyons" program. Unique in its approach, Concrete to Canyons received the 2014 America's Best Idea grant from the National Park Foundation.

Barb Graves, Zion's Education Coordinator, shares, "The aim of the grant is to engage diverse audiences in meaningful and relevant ways with national parks and to inspire participants to become stewards of our National Park System." The National Park Foundation grant was matched by the Zion National Park Foundation and the Andre Agassi Foundation to allow more students to participate. The program was then executed in partnership with the staff from Lake Mead National Recreational Area and Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument.

In preparation for the excursion, the AACPA and Rainbow Dream Academy staff participated in their own training; the first Zion Concrete to Canyons Teacher Institute. Instruction provided the staff with an in-park camping experience and orientation prior to the student visits. The goal of the Institute was to introduce the teachers to the park's natural and cultural resources while also participating in some of the same activities and camping situations that the students would experience during their visits. For most, it was also their first visit to Zion.

For four days and three nights, students and teachers engaged in ranger-led hikes and activities throughout the park including the East Rim, Weeping Rock, the Grotto, the Narrows, as well as participating in the Night Sky Program. It was apparent to the staff that the children and the chaperones were overwhelmed with amazement. The children filled their wilderness journals with insights and thoughts reflecting their experience.

Around the campfire students and staff would tell of their deeper appreciation for public lands and how they learned the importance of protecting and respecting the plant and animal life.



left: Students walking to the Virgin River to explore canyon-building.
top: Building miniature canyons along the river to show weathering and erosion when water is added.
above: Students share their impressions of Weeping Rock with Ranger Eleanor



Camp is set in Watchman campground

When asked to share their favorite experience during the trip, the responses were simple, yet priceless: putting up their tents; building canyons in the river; seeing Saturn through a telescope; sitting around a campfire; roasting and eating s'mores; seeing the ostriches on the bus trip; hiking; the waterfall at Weeping Rock; getting to draw the mountains; experiences that are all too often taken for granted. Most of all, the children enjoyed the physical activities and challenges associated with exploring the great outdoors.

Much can be said for the Zion National Park Foundation (ZNPF). Their efforts are the primary financial support behind Concrete to Canyons. At the top of ZNPF's fundraising endeavors is the annual Zion National Park Plein Air Art Invitational. Lyman Hafen, Executive Director of ZNPF, reflected on the 2014 event, which delivered a resounding \$160,000-40% of which will go directly to the Foundation to support the park's Youth Education Initiative and ongoing art programs.

"This year's plein air event exceeded all our goals and expectations. We were overwhelmed by the amount of support... This event is the perfect example of how a national park, a non-profit partner, and a community can partner for the good of a place we all love so much."

And then there's Andre Agassi. When *Etched Magazine* spoke with Andre in 2011, he shared his committed to making things happen for the children of inner-city Las Vegas. "I had been ranked number one in the world (dropping to #110). Deep inside I hated tennis at that time in my life. I hated what it had taken from me. It had given me some skills though. So I decided to connect with my sport... to make a systemic change in a child's life - which is the school, and why I played tennis long after my body told me to stop." Noted as potentially the greatest comeback in tennis history, Andre proved the doubters wrong, winning the French Open and the U.S. Open in 1999 returning him to the #1 ranking... all for the ability to raise funds and awareness for the school.

Agassi Prep was dubbed a National Model Charter School by the U.S. Department of Education in 2003 and since has received many accolades over the years. The collaboration with Zion National Park is just another reflection of Agassi's commitment to his kids.

Once the children returned to their classrooms, they began preparation for a stewardship program at Lake Mead National Recreation Area this spring. The Concrete to Canyons program equipped these students and their families with the tools to responsibly conserve, manage, and advocate for our natural resources—an effort deemed worthy of America's Best Idea.

Information and images provided by the Zion Natural History Association.

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ZION NATIONAL PARK FOUNDATION VISION

The Zion National Park Foundation is the official fundraising partner of Zion National Park. The Foundation operates as a division of Zion Natural History Association (ZNHA), a 501(c) (3) not-for-profit corporation in the State of Utah. Established in 1929, ZNHA operates the retail sales in park visitor centers. The retail operations of ZNHA fund the overhead of the Foundation, making it possible for more than 90 percent of Foundation-generated funds to go directly to important projects in Zion National Park.