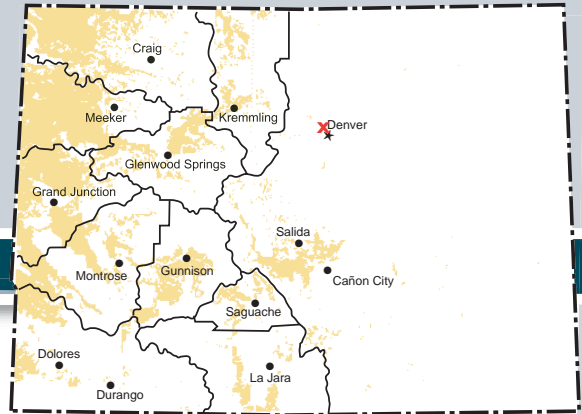


# COLORADO

## ROAD TRIP

November 2004



### Colorado WOW Brings the Mountains to Inner City Kids

Warm, bright sunlight filters through the tall mountain trees. Wispy clouds slowly move across the blue sky. Little brown furry creatures the size of a mouse stop to look around, then quickly scurry across the rocky ground as the rumbling sound of a car approaches. Six white vans come to a stop on the dirt road and inner city children from the ages of eight to ten pile out to experience the mountains for the first time. WOW!

This is what the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Colorado and its partners running the Colorado Wonderful Outdoor World (WOW) Program hope to hear from these and other children as they participate in a program designed to bring the great outdoors to urban youth. While living in this great state, the mountains are enticingly close but often inaccessible to these kids. WOW gives them the opportunity to experience 24-hours of camping in one of Colorado's State Parks.

WOW campers participate in a set of activities that teach them basic camping skills, as well as care and appreciation for the natural environment. The campouts; however, are not all about curriculum. Mostly, they are carefully designed for age appropriate outdoor activities, challenges, and exercise. "This program allows children to gain a new experience, a new perspective, and a new way of viewing life, verses being in the inner city," said Ken Sherbenou, WOW Camp Director. "All some [kids] know is the city and they never get a chance to be exposed to what WOW has to offer. The children learn a lot in 24-hours."

The program offers three different levels. WOW One teaches basic camping skills, such as pitching tents and teamwork. WOW Two and Three build and expand on those skills with challenging activities such as wall climbing, swinging loops, and zip lining. The programs are carefully designed for groups of 20-50 kids with specific programs for children ages eight to ten, 11 and 12, and teenagers.

"If I would have not participated in this WOW Three, I would have stayed at home, watched T.V. and talked on the phone," said 12-year-old Julia Lucero. "But I





remembered I had fun at WOW One, so I decided to come back.”

Fourteen-year-old Israel Salas is most fond of the freedom experienced during his outdoor sojourn. “What I enjoy the most is the swinging loops because it lets you feel free. Out here I’m more to myself verses at home I would just be watching T.V.” The swinging loops are an activity that consists of five loops hanging in mid air from two trees. The object of the course is for the individual to swing his or her feet from one loop to the next until reaching the end of the course.

The national WOW Program got its start as a collaborative effort between BLM and The Disney Company in the mid 1990s. Executives engaged in a discussion of how meaningful early childhood camping experiences were, and realized that a program bringing these experiences to urban kids

could have a powerful impact. It has. The WOW program has affected the lives of tens of thousands of urban youth over the past decade.

Planning for the Colorado WOW Program began in 1996 with a partnership between the BLM and citizens from local communities in the greater metro Denver and Aurora areas. Colorado followed the national WOW organizational model, and in 1998 implemented its first camps. Over the years, the program has evolved into a collaborative venture with national, state, and local partners.

Colorado WOW operates on an annual budget of \$100,000. The 2004 program was made possible by a \$30,000 contribution from BLM Colorado. The remainder of the program funding came from “in-kind” funds provided by the African American Leadership Institute (AALI) and its partners. The AALI administers the WOW program and works with other recreation oriented organizations that host individual WOW camping trips. This year these organizations included Americorp, Denver Housing, Denver Kids, Denver Parks and Recreation, Earth Force, I Have A Dream Foundation, and Urban League.

“This program is beneficial because it allows them [inner-city children] to get away from the noise and environment of the city,” said Linda Williams, the Executive Director of the AALI, and of Colorado WOW. “They also meet new friends, build social and communication skills, and have a chance to see the beauty of Colorado.”

BLM Colorado is proud to help provide such a valuable program for inner city youth. To many of these kids the Rocky Mountains are just beautiful scenery in the distance. This program helps bring them into that scenery to experience the joy that is Colorado’s mountains.

To learn more about WOW, contact Chuck Romaniello, Social Scientist/Economist for BLM Colorado, at 303.239.3776.

