I take a deep breath, raise the maul, and bring it down. The tool hits the ground with a dull thud. Again, it has missed its target: a vertical log atop a larger piece of wood that rests on the snow-covered ground. I look around at my classmates, who have pulled off their sweaters and scarves, despite the February chill, as they grow warm from splitting wood that now forms a pile nearby. This shouldn't be so difficult, I think as I turn back to my own log. I raise the maul again, making sure my work-gloved hands have a firm grip on the smooth wooden handle and that my feet are wide apart. Then I let it go. The sound that follows is a satisfying thwack. I look down to see not one large log, but two smaller ones. I smile at this seemingly insignificant accomplishment and wonder, as I continue to work, if I could ever have imagined this before coming here.
I first heard about Chewonki Semester School from my cousin. She mentioned someone she knew who had left her home, school, and routine to spend four months at an alternative school in coastal Maine. The description sparked my interest. Although I loved my small, friendly school, I was restless. I wanted something more—something completely different that would really challenge me and give me a taste of the world beyond classes, clubs, and volunteering. Summer programs weren’t quite what I was looking for; studying abroad seemed too big a step. Then, on the Internet, I found descriptions of semester schools.

Small boarding schools where students spend half a year of high school, semester schools are relatively new (the oldest were founded in the 1980s). Most are for juniors, although some accept younger and older students, and emphasize subjects such as the arts, urban studies, or sustainable living. I pored over websites, read blog posts, and clicked through online photo albums, imagining myself in one of these intriguing places. I’m not sure what made me fall in love with Chewonki Semester School, which is run by the Chewonki Foundation, a nonprofit environmental education organization. Maybe it was their focus on environmental studies and sustainability, or the emphasis on community living.

My family and I discussed the benefits of a semester school: It offered rigorous academics and a chance to live independently, meet people from across the country, and have new experiences in and out of the classroom. I submitted an application, and two months later, learned that I’d been accepted to Chewonki’s Semester 52. And so, almost a year later, I found myself in the backseat of my family’s car—which was jam-packed with everything I’d need for the spring semester, from skis to schoolbooks—still wondering exactly what I was getting into.

No Time for Nerves
When I arrived on the wooded peninsula in rural Wiscasset, Maine, several teachers greeted me warmly. Amy, who would be my advisor and English teacher, led my parents and me to a gray wooden cabin overlooking a snow-covered field while I tried to disguise my nervousness. I’d lived in the same town in Maine all my life and had never been away from my family for more than a couple of weeks.

Inside, I met the seven girls with whom I would be living for the next four months. Although it was January in Maine, the cabin was cozy and warm thanks to the woodstove in the center of the building. After relinquishing my cell phone and saying goodbye to my parents, I began unpacking and arranging my belongings on shelves by my bed, wondering if this place would someday feel like home.

After a few whirlwind days of orientation and meetings emphasizing the school’s philosophy of mutual trust and healthy living, my 41 classmates and I settled into a routine. Weekdays began at 7:00 a.m. when all the students and faculty gathered in a circle outside to divvy up morning chores. Working to keep things running smoothly is a key part of life at Chewonki, and before breakfast everyone completed tasks such as collecting trash and recycling and setting up the dining hall.
A Chewonki semester includes at least one wilderness trip. Here, Charlotte (right) and classmates are shown near the East Branch of the Penobscot River in northern Maine.

Students attending Chewonki Semester School are required to work at the Chewonki Foundation four hours a week. In addition to chopping wood and caring for the farm animals, students cook, clean, plant seeds, and learn to shear sheep.

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I began compiling lists of books I wanted to read, recipes to make, and projects to try. And almost every day, I had an experience or conversation that showed me a new possibility or perspective.

In addition to morning chores, each student is required to work at the Chewonki Foundation four hours a week. During the semester, I split and stacked wood, cleaned cages for rehabilitated owls, made pizza, planted seeds, and cared for animals on Chewonki’s organic Saltmarsh Farm, all alongside classmates and faculty members. Who knew that scrubbing bathrooms with a math teacher would not only be routine but enjoyable?

After breakfast came morning meeting followed by classes, which are small, hands-on, and discussion-based. In addition to traditional academic classes, students take Natural History of the Maine Coast; Sustainability; and Farm Talk, which explores issues of farming and food, including human-animal relationships and food insecurity. A typical week also includes science field trips, outdoor activity periods, and workshops on everything from bike repair to yoga to languages. Although the full days were an adjustment, I was grateful for the busy schedule, which didn’t allow time for homesickness.

**Close-Knit and Far-Reaching**

The varied backgrounds of Chewonki faculty and staff and their willingness to engage with students on multiple levels allowed us to learn from some amazing people. One teacher had conducted scientific research in Antarctica, while another had worked as an environmental lobbyist in Washington. Several had spent years in other countries, and all had unique interests, ranging from bagpiping to beekeeping. I learned that there are many choices you can make about how you want to live and that less mainstream choices are no less valid. I began compiling lists of books I wanted to read, recipes to make, and projects to try. And almost every day, I had an experience or conversation that showed me a new possibility or perspective.

Each night, my cabin mates and I returned to our cabin to finish homework and hang out until a faculty member came to check us in. Teachers might settle down at the small picnic table in our cabin for a chat or a game of Bananagrams, bring their dog or a homemade treat, or sing a song or read a story. This is just one example of the relationship between students and adults at Chewonki. We were treated almost as equals, but had to prove responsible enough to deserve this level of trust. Similar relationships existed with other adults at the Foundation; I had countless memorable conversations with cooks, farmers, and maintenance and office staff as we worked together and shared meals.

When you live, learn, eat, work, and play within such a close-knit community, everyone gets to know one another in a more meaningful way than a traditional school setting might allow. Giving up my cell phone for a semester was a small price to pay for all I gained at Chewonki. By the end of my four months there, I was amazed at how close we had all become and how much I had learned from so many people.

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