

# Life

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Gap years are becoming an increasingly popular antidote for burnout and fears about an unproductive college career among incoming freshmen.



Part of Pennsbury High School graduate Liana Eyre's gap year with Rustic Pathways included bungee jumping (or bundy jumping, as the Kiwis spell it) in Queenstown, New Zealand.

# Diving into the Gap

By NAILA FRANCIS  
STAFF WRITER

When Harvey took her SATs, wrote her recommendation letters, visited college campuses far and wide — and then applied to 12.

But come September, the recent Central Bucks West High School graduate won't be sitting in a classroom at any of them.

Instead, she'll be sleeping in hammocks in the jungles of Indonesia, trekking through rice paddies and along volcano rims and hunting sloth-like creatures known as kus kus as she studies the many complex ecosystems across the archipelago nation.

And that's all before she takes off for South Africa to work on a wild animal reserve and, later, at an orphanage.

"I never really saw myself going to college the first year and I don't really know why," says Harvey, who has watched her older sister vacillate between majors as a pre-med student for the last two years. "I knew I didn't want to do that and I wouldn't do well in college if I went not knowing what I like and what I have a passion for. I felt like I could take this year to explore myself and find who I am and what I want to do."

The Doylestown Township teen is one of thousands, who instead of joining the ranks of incoming college freshmen in August, will embark on a gap year. Prominent in Europe since the 1960s, the intentional and structured break from formal education before college is becoming increasingly popular in the U.S.

The American Gap Association, a nonprofit accreditation organization for such programs, estimates about 40,000 Americans participated in a gap year last year, an increase of almost 20 percent since 2006.



Video online

## BURNOUT AND BUCKS

"Two big issues are at play here," says Ethan Knight, AGA executive director. "One is burnout. It takes much more nowadays to get into a good college. There's a lot more pressure to do well in high school, so by the time students get into college, it's 'Whew, I got in. I can't imagine doing this for four more years.'"

Knight, who took a gap year himself in 1996, traveling to India, Nepal and Tibet, points to escalating college costs as another contributing factor.

"The relationship to college is changing," he says. "People are looking at it and saying it used to be you work one part-time job and graduate with maybe a grand in debt. Nowadays, at best, you'll graduate \$30-\$40,000 in debt so you'd better know what you're getting into."

Such financial concerns inspired Grace Hartman's decision to spend 89 days backpacking, canoeing, canyoneering and rock climbing in the Rocky Mountains through the Wyoming-based National Outdoor Leadership School come August. The recent Council Rock High School North graduate will also undergo Wilderness First Responder training.

"We are young and ... college doesn't have to be right away," says the outdoor enthusiast and avid athlete from Newtown. "A lot of times, kids just go back home to live with their parents because they are paying off debts and cannot afford their own place. So I figured I'll explore my interests while I can before I become tied down by the economy and other realities."

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"I am very aware there is more to life than a good grade, and I learned that in the mountains," says Grace Hartman, whose love of backpacking inspired her upcoming gap year in the Rockies. Here, she hikes the Zirkel mountains in Colorado.

## Sometimes, the best way to say 'I love you' is in sharing a riotous laugh

Naila Francis



Life in LaLa Land

My brother and his family are packing up to leave our holiday cookout when Josie, my niece, hears a song on the radio and runs to turn it up.

We are in the kitchen, after the seconds have been picked at, the dishes cleared and washed, the leftovers parceled out. My mom is about to take Whitney, our mercurial toy poodle, for a walk, when Josie proclaims "That's my jam" and cranks up Shakira's "Hips Don't Lie," proceeding to shake hers for all they are worth.

For the girl who for two years in a row asked for hip-hop dance lessons and then played shy during every recital, barely willing to show us her moves in private let alone onstage, the

moment is revelatory.

Josie can dance. Yes, she hams it up, exaggerating some movements with spastic glee, but she has rhythm. My brother Joachim whips out his iPhone and begins taking a video over her flimsy protests. Once I get over my surprise, I begin imitating Josie's hand and hip motions — I've always loved Shakira's hit and it's still, after all these years, a favorite in my Zumba class — but it isn't long before I'm doing my own thing.

My mom, meanwhile, has started dancing, too, shimmying and twirling around. And pretty soon, my brother puts down his phone and joins in, wild and fevered with an energy that often inspires others to get

to their feet when he's out at festivals or other events.

By this point, Whitney is plain bewildered and Betsy, my brother's wife, is standing at the edge of the kitchen, alternating between laughter and her own hesitant attempts to "feel the conga" and move like the sultry Colombian singer. We all waiver between earnestness and goofy delirium.

And, for me, that spontaneous dance party right in my mom's kitchen is the best five minutes of my entire day. By the end, we are all breathless and brimming with laughter, and the flurry of goodbyes that follows is charged with an extra sweetness.

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I admit it with pride: My family and I are some of the biggest goofballs I know.

Pennsbury High School graduate Liana Eyre enjoys a Fiji Day celebration with two new friends in the village of Nasivikoso in the highlands of Fiji during her gap year. "I've always liked working with kids," she says.



## How to plan for a gap year

Holly Bull, president of the Center for Interim programs, a gap year counseling service, offers these tips to choose the right program for you:

- (1) Apply to colleges during senior year with the support of college counselors; plan to ask for a deferral once admitted.
- (2) Outline reasons for wanting to take a gap year.
- (3) Research options online, through gap year fairs and by speaking with other gap year students. Consider brainstorming with a gap year counselor.
- (4) Compile information to present to parents, college counselors and for your deferral letter.
- (5) Lay out a budget for your gap year. Consider working during the summers to help pay for it even if you don't have to, as a gap year is about taking personal and financial responsibility.
- (6) Do not worry about creating the perfect gap year; students learn from everything, especially stepping into the world in a more independent way.

## Gap

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### IN PURSUIT OF CLARITY

By taking advantage of the opportunities to travel, volunteer, work or intern in myriad settings anywhere from two months to two years after graduating high school, students like Hartman are looking to redefine a more-traditional trajectory. They're also delving into a rare consideration on their path, says Knight: "Nowhere in there do we really ask, 'What do you want to do with the rest of your life?' Nowhere in there is having to love what you do."

Grace Berichon, also a Council Rock North graduate, has been accepted into the nursing programs at both Ohio State University and the University of Pittsburgh. The Newtown Township teen has always loved working with kids and figured she'd study pediatrics. But when her father's company transferred him to Johannesburg for three years, she seized the opportunity to live with her family in South Africa for a year before going to college — even if she won't be guaranteed acceptance at OSU or Pitt upon her return.

"It will give me time to relax from the pressures of intense studying at school. Because I will have that time to relax, I can reflect and figure out what I really want to be doing with my life before I jump back into studying," says Berichon, who leaves this summer.

While in Johannesburg, she will pursue several volunteer opportunities in and around the city, including caring for infants at an orphanage. If she changes her mind about nursing along the way, so be it.

"I would be very grateful that I found out then over the course of the gap year because I don't want to spend that time in school only to discover it's not what I want to do," she says.

### COLLEGES WEIGH IN

While Berichon will be re-evaluated as a freshman once she's back in the U.S., many colleges are willing to defer enrollment for students taking a gap year. Some even encourage the break — Harvard University, in its admittance letter, asks incoming freshmen if they've considered a gap year — while several have begun partially funding such opportunities to make them accessible to students from low and middle-income backgrounds.

Tufts University in Massachusetts this year announced the creation of Tufts 1+4, which, starting in the fall of 2015, will offer financial aid to students interested in doing a year of national or international service prior to beginning their undergraduate studies. The University of North Carolina and Wisconsin's St. Norbert College offer similar opportunities, and since 2009, more than 123 newly admitted freshmen have participated in Princeton University's Bridge Year Program, volunteering abroad in locations including Peru, Senegal and China.

Director John Luria says the Bridge Year evolved out of a desire for students to develop an international perspective and an appreciation for what it means to serve others. Upon returning, participants also report a greater maturity, self-awareness and sense of priorities.

"They find themselves having an increased willingness to take on risk and handle challenge," says Luria.

These students are also typically eager to make a difference in their local



"I really do want to gain a new global experience because in our little bubble of Newtown, everything is so convenient and so nice," says Grace Berichon, a Council Rock High School North graduate, who will be spending her gap year in Johannesburg, South Africa.

communities while in college, and out in the world after graduation. Previous Bridge Year participants have embraced projects from helping prison inmates study for their GED to making a documentary on sex trafficking in India.

"They're a very engaged group and they definitely inspire me," Luria says. "These are students who want to make an impact on society for the good."

Such outcomes counter the lingering stigma about the value of a gap year.

### OWNING THE PROCESS

"It's not a goof-off year. It's not a year off. It's so totally a year on," says Holly Bull, president of The Center for Interim Programs, a gap year counseling organization founded in 1980. "You can't do this on automatic pilot. It's uncharted territory. It's not for somebody who's not willing to step into that dynamic, more-conscious process of sorting out what they want to do."

Bull, herself a beneficiary of two gap years and a frequent speaker at gap year fairs across the country, points to an important psychological shift underscoring such a break.

"We're all put in school at 5 or 6, and then it's 'I have to. I ought to. I should.' 'What would people think if I don't do this?' is really what's running the show. With a gap year, it's 'I choose to take this year, and within this year, I choose and pick what I want to do.' Students own the process much more," she says. "If you can learn that at this age, you carry that into college and beyond."

Harvey will visit Indonesia with the student adventure travel program Where There Be Dragons. The focus on trekking appealed to her active, fast-paced personality and love of the outdoors. She chose to then work at a wildlife park with the organization GoEco because of her affinity for animals. And though she has no concrete ideas about a future career, she knows she may want to work with kids, which is why she included volunteering at an orphanage.

"I kind of just want to explore, to challenge myself and see how far I can push

myself so I'm sure of what I want to do," says Harvey, who may also independently get a job in a European city and immerse herself in the language while waiting to hear back from the colleges she'll apply to while at home in between trips to Indonesia and South Africa.

### BEYOND THE EXPENSE

If it all sounds exorbitant, especially without financial aid from a gap year-friendly college, Knight cautions taking a break doesn't have to be a budget-buster. With international airfare one of the biggest expenses in traveling overseas, there are many domestic programs available, too, from opportunities to explore jobs in just about every field imaginable including government, animal care, finance and craftsmanship through Dynamy Internship Year to the chance to learn sustainable living skills on a North Carolina farm with Pioneer Project.

"If a student can work in the summer to pay for a gap year, in the fall, they can go off and do something very low-cost," says Bull. "They've got this carrot out there in front of them. If they're excited, they will make it happen."

Hartman does plan on attending the University of Vermont, where she's deferred her enrollment, in the spring or fall of 2015, but she has no idea what she'd like to study.

"I never thought I would have an issue going to college, and I probably don't. However, I don't feel ready," she says. "Despite academic and athletic achievements and challenges, I still needed one more challenge to really push myself into the maturation I want when I enter college."

Yes, taking a gap year can stave off predicaments such as parents having to pay for five or six years of college when they've only budgeted for four because their kids are changing majors or even schools in an attempt to find their path. But it also, according to Knight, creates lifelong learners.

"Passion," he says, "is a bigger predictor of success than IQ will ever be."

Liana Eyre, a 2013 graduate of

### For more information

- The Center for Interim Programs:  
[www.interimprograms.com](http://www.interimprograms.com)
- American Gap Association:  
[www.americangap.org](http://www.americangap.org)
- Taking Off Gap Year Consultants:  
[www.takingoff.net](http://www.takingoff.net)
- USA Gap Year Fairs:  
[www.usagapyearfairs.org](http://www.usagapyearfairs.org)

Pennsbury High School, was wary of settling on a college based solely on its athletic programs. So last September, the lacrosse and hockey player signed on with Rustic Pathways to spend three months in Fiji, New Zealand and Australia, rebuilding houses devastated by a cyclone, farming, surfing, learning to sail and being trained as a lifeguard.

Along the way, Eyre discovered a passion for helping others and learning about cultures unlike her own. She also gained a sense of independence when, following a brief return to Yardley, she traveled on her own to Ireland to work with kids at an outdoor adventure center in the surf town of Bundoran.

"It was the first time I've been by myself with nobody looking over me," says Eyre. "That made me grow up. I had no idea who I was in high school. With a gap year, you really just get to know yourself better because you don't have people telling you what to do all the time. You have to make your own decisions."

### CONTINUING ON

Since returning to the states in April, Eyre has decided to forgo college for massage therapy school.

"My parents are open to the idea that not everybody has to go to college and there are different paths for people to take," she says. "I will probably go in the direction of sports massage because I would still like to be involved in athletics."

Eyre may have her parents' support, but one of the primary concerns about students taking a gap year is the potential for their academic path to be permanently disrupted.

"If you take a gap year, you're already framing college in your mind from the get-go. The data that's out there shows 90 percent who take a gap year are back at university within one year," says Knight, referring to research by Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson, authors of "The Gap-Year Advantage: Helping Your Child Benefit from Time Off Before or During College."

In their independent study of 280 gap-year students, Haigler and Nelson found among the top outcomes of delaying college was that students were able to apply skills and knowledge gained to their academic major or career. These students also reported greater job satisfaction later in life.

In his research on gap years, Bob Claggett, former director of admissions at Middlebury College in Vermont, noted students at Middlebury who took one had higher GPAs across all four years of school than those who didn't.

"These are students who have leadership skills, maturity, they're less likely to drink as much, they're not going to flounder as much trying to figure out majors. You will have a much more efficient student," says Bull, "which is what colleges want."

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