

So, this is my second time attending the sophomore leadership retreat and, as expected, it topped all my expectations. I was pushed to challenge myself and I trepidly inched into activities that I was unfamiliar with. Usually, I try my best to stay in my comfort zone but, much like the majority of the students that attend the retreat, I slowly began to feel comfortable with the idea of taking risks and moving into my learning zone.

The excitement began to build Friday afternoon after class ended. I packed my bags and, before I knew it, it was time to head to Michigan. The retreat began with some interesting ice breakers that entailed lots of high-fives, a few dance moves, and tons of laughs. Most of us saw faces that we weren't familiar with and, in a few minutes, our networks grew to encompass a multitude of classmates who very quickly became our friends.

The very next morning, breakfast was served and then we were all assigned to groups to begin a series of team building activities called Team Olympics. It was raining but that didn't stop anyone from having fun. In fact, in my opinion, the rain added an exhilarating aspect to the Team Olympics because all of the equipment was slippery which made the activities a little more tricky. When we began the Team Olympics, my team, Shia Labeouf, consisted of an accumulation of individuals but by the end of the Team Olympics, we defined the term "team". It didn't take long for us to get close, literally and figuratively, as the activities required us to overcome our insecurities and pull together.

It's crucial to note that the Team Olympics was the perfect prelude to the low ropes course and the Life Mapping activity in which we 'mapped' out our lives by writing about our hopes, aspirations, values, and legacies. I didn't expect this activity to become intimate but, again, my expectations were topped. While my team discussed what we wrote during the activity, I realized how much I appreciated each of my team members because they were all such amazing individuals who had overcome overwhelming hardships. Each of us had a unique story and we all paint these stories with different variations and hues of color. The diversity and, at the same time, commonality that was shared among my group members proves that we're all different and, yet, we're all the same: human.

After Life Mapping, I embraced the high ropes course. Of course, when I say 'embrace' what I actually mean is chickened out for the first ten minutes on the course. Before climbing to the top of the high ropes course, we were all briefed on how to transfer from one element, or obstacle, of the course to another and then we were told to pick a partner. I cannot express how thankful I was to have had a partner who forced me to complete the obstacle course. To be completely honest, as soon as I climbed to the top of the course, I looked at my partner and I said, "-would you be mad if I backed out right now because this is too high for me?" - my partner looked at me with a straight face and said, "Yusra, trust me; you can do this and you're going to do this so just don't look down, ok?" -At that point, I knew there was no turning back and I let my partner lead the way. The results? An astronomical feeling of accomplishment! I was so glad that I was given the chance to take a safe and calculated risk because this opportunity is usually not available in our day-to-day lives. As fun as the high ropes course was, it was exhausting and I was ready for some dinner and a relaxed game night. I fell asleep in anticipation of the next day of activities.

By 7:30 the following morning, everyone was up and ready to go. My team was scheduled for organic farming on Sunday morning. Yellow beans, purple beans, purple carrots, goats, and garlic were just a few of the things we saw at the organic farm. As my team members painted buckets that will be used to collect crops, I volunteered to dice the cucumbers that were used to make the veggie dip. We all shared memories related to food as we headed back to the lake front to kayak and canoe. Once we reached the lake, everyone picked a canoe or a kayak and we headed out into the water. It was so relaxing to look out onto the lake while canoeing and realize that we live in such a big world. Sometimes, when we're caught up with our academics and extracurricular activities, we forget that our problems are really tiny when they're put into perspective.

As soon as we were finished kayaking and canoeing, we were back in the water for the boat building activity. Every team was required to develop and advertise a boat made of cardboard and tape. The commercial for every boat was, without a doubt, hilarious and it highlighted the great amount of creativity that IIT students have. The best memories I shared with my team were made while we built our boat because it was intriguing to see all of our backgrounds come together to contribute to the best engineering feat that hit the water. It was really a good time to take a step back and think about the culmination of every team's efforts and to realize how close we had become in such a short amount of time. Before we knew it, it was over and we were on the buses heading back to campus.

The chance to visit Michigan to participate in the Sophomore Leadership Retreat was such a blessing and, if you were on team Shia Labeouf and you're reading this, I just want you to know how awesome you are. The memories we made together will last forever because the Sophomore Leadership Retreat was definitely one of the most memorable events of my college career. One thing that, I think, everyone was able to take back with them was new connections. You probably know what I mean when I say this because I'm sure you see familiar faces from the retreat when you're on campus and going about your day-to-day activities. If you see me on campus, don't be afraid to walk up to me and say hi because if you don't, I will!

Stay Classy,

Yusra Sarhan