

# The Spark Interview: December 2017 / Hayden

## Hayden, Age 28

Former youth who stayed at Urban Peak Colorado Springs

### Where do you work now?

I am a manager at a nightclub in St .Louis.

### What is your life's dream?

I hope to open a recreational center/café/gym/hostel. The idea is to have a warehouse filled with artist studios with a program designed to allow those artists to work with youth in the community in the different mediums at no cost to the youth. The café and hostel would be work opportunities for youth. I just want to have a place where youth have access to work and art despite their financial or social situation.

I would target at-risk and marginalized youth, offer them employment in any area of my warehouse, and let the networking with artists happen organically.

For youth not interested in employment, I would set up a program where they would go through some basic training in the medium they are interested so that we can ensure proper use and care of the tools used.

At the end of every year I want to put on a benefit where the artists and youth can showcase the artwork they've created over the year so that the community would have the opportunity to hear those voices.

### How old were you when you came to Urban Peak?

I was 18 when I first entered the program and 21 when I finally exited.



### What sorts of things did Urban Peak help you with?

To answer this question in full, I'll need to give you some background. My parents abandoned me as a child so I was raised by my grandparents in Texas. They are devout Southern Baptists and come from a generation much different from mine. When I came out as a lesbian at 16, they asked me to leave their home believing I was an abomination. I was forced to drop out of high school and live with a mother I never knew.

After three months of attempting to forge any kind of bond with her, I found out about Urban Peak via Inside/Out. Before this, I struggled with knowing my value in the world. I had never had any real positive relationships with adults and was hardly encouraged to use my voice, so working with the staff and volunteers at UPCS was a huge turning point for me. They motivated, empowered, and above all – they believed in me. I found my voice and I learned how to use it well.

## The Spark Interview: December 2017 / Hayden



Hayden, other youth, and Urban Peak staff at Gill Foundation celebrating *Colors of Courage*

I became a strong activist within the queer youth community, and in that journey I helped UPCS develop inclusive policies for trans-identifying (or non-identifying) youth. Something I did made a difference, and making that difference opened my eyes to my worth in the world. I grew up believing my life didn't matter. UPCS made me believe otherwise.

Through UPCS, I got into therapy. I scored the third highest score in the state of Colorado on my GED. I attended PPCC. I found a gender therapist, Dara Hoffman (she wasn't a gender therapist at the time, I was her first client) I navigated the red tape of hormone therapy.

Audrey personally drove me out to Denver to see a qualified Physician. I built healthy relationships. I found myself, found how to express myself, and feel that I have UPCS to thank for my success in the adult world.

### What are one or two of your best experiences at Urban Peak?

I had a ton of fun at my first Building Futures, Building Lives event where we set

up the floor as a kind of maze where guests attending the dinner had to experience what it is like to check in to the program. I felt that we touched a lot of people by bringing in that perspective.

Once you're going through your suitcase with a case manager for that initial inventory, things feel real. Almost surreal. Some of our donors may never know what that's like, so I thought it was a great thing to bring to the surface.

Obviously, my brief time as a Direct Care Support Staff is also one of my favorite times at UPCS. After I had been away from the program a few years, I was welcomed back as a staff member. I had spent a ton of time around all of the adults working and volunteering at UPCS when I was a youth, so it was fun for me to be that staff member for the youth. I offered that perspective for them; I had spent time at UPCS as a youth so I knew the struggle well. I know when I first moved in to the shelter, I was skeptical about the staff. You know, you have this idea that everyone is there for a paycheck and could care less about what you've been through. It was refreshing to be utterly wrong about that idea, and I think the youth in the program while I was staff felt comfort in knowing that I had been in their shoes once and came back to help the community in which I came from.

### What were one or two of your toughest times before you came to Urban Peak?

I've grown so far in myself that my life before UPCS feels like a different life entirely. It was difficult for me to come to terms with my identity because it meant breaking the hearts of my grandparents, who would never understand anything outside of a binary heteronormative Christian identity. I struggled with loving

## *The Spark Interview: December 2017 / Hayden*

myself, in believing that I would live past adolescence because I just saw no point to try. If I hadn't found UPCS and the adults within, I probably would not have the social skills to accomplish all that I have thus far, and I certainly wouldn't have the sense of self I have today.

If you could say something to the staff at Urban Peak when you were here – what would you say?

I think it's amazing that "Thank you" feels empty when I think of what I would say to Audrey, Tara, Sara E., Becky, Daniel, Natalie, Wendy, Eric, Max, Mel, Noreen, Chef Stephanie, etc.

Keeping those office doors open and allowing me to cry, sleep, whine, vent, brainstorm, create, destroy, whatever – it has really shaped who I am today. You always made me feel heard. Even if there wasn't an answer to a question or a solution to a problem, you heard the issue or the problem. I never felt like you didn't take me seriously and that means everything to a scared youth on their own. You always made time for me even when we had a full house, and I know that's not easy. You help so many different youth from so many different backgrounds, and yet there was always room for one more youth in that already full heart of yours.

You were there to help, in any way, and not one of us suffered for the other. I don't know how you manage to hold so much compassion in one being, but it is felt. I cannot express my gratitude. Sincerely, my vocabulary is too small to find the right way to express in full just what your presence in my life has meant. I try to lead my life the way I've learned from each of you. I try to be open, honest, compassionate, available, and I always have a listening ear for anyone

who might need it. So simple but so incredibly valuable.

What should the community in general know about being a youth in homelessness?

We need you to believe in us. We won't believe in ourselves until it's shown that we are worthy of such confidence.



**Urban Peak Colorado Springs**  
423 East Cuchurras Street  
Colorado Springs, CO 80903  
[www.urbanpeak.org/colorado-springs](http://www.urbanpeak.org/colorado-springs)  
719-630-3223

*Our mission is to ignite the potential in youth to exit homelessness and create self-determined, fulfilled lives.*