

Sam: Hey there everybody! This is Sam Hinkle, the Marketing and Development Director with the Rocky Mountain Field Institute, coming at you with your very first episode of Shovel Stories, the RMFI podcast where we talk with our volunteers and partners and all the people that make our on-the-ground stewardship of public lands possible.

And today, I am joined by our very first guest and Volunteer of the Year [2025], Halie Kritner glad to have you here today.

Halie: Yeah, thank you. Appreciate it.

Sam: Well, so, one thing, you know, this being the first podcast, it's not like I have any, trend that I can claim, but I have talked to a lot of our volunteers over the last year...a lot of our partners, a lot of our donors, and one thing that I think it's, it's, it's not rocket science, right? It's, it's pretty obvious that people get involved with RMFI. Because they care about the outdoors. I'd love to hear a little bit about your favorite outdoor places here in Southern Colorado to start us off.

Halie: Yeah. All right. Yeah. Handing the stick over.

Sam: Yeah. For those of you at home, we have a microphone attached to a stick here. That's, that is step one on this podcast. Maybe someday we'll have an actual microphone, but this is pretty cool right now.

Halie: It is, I have to say. So, yeah, so regarding coming here to Colorado, this is my first time ever stationed stateside. And so immediately when I came here, saw that the Rocky Mountains were in my backyard. I'm born and raised in Wisconsin, and so I grew up on hills, as you would say. And so the fact that there were mountains accessible and the military, being active duty, we get a incredible discount or Epic passes.

And so I go skiing and snowboarding constantly over the span of the winter. And another aspect of what I like about Colorado is the fact that you guys are so...everything is based on trying to get people outside. So your parks and all your recreational aspects...I hadn't seen anywhere else that I was ever stationed and even in Wisconsin either. And then I think probably the fact that you guys have the sun being out all year round helps a lot. Like we hunker down in the winter in Wisconsin. So, here, the fact that I could, like, pursue my outdoor passions all year round just made it even more enjoyable. And so following, going on the All Trails app is what I usually use. And the second I got here every single weekend, I started hiking the trails.

And so I'd have to say, yeah, my two best aspects that I see for Colorado, especially the Springs, is the fact that the mountains are so accessible and the trails are incredibly well maintained. And then sure enough, that's where y'all come in. So yeah, I had hiked the trails here for...I'd say six to eight months before I even heard about RMFI.

Sam: And now, in that early period of you being here, were there any trails that like really stood out to you as like, man, this is, this is like, this is my jam. This is my happy spot. I want to get after this every weekend if I can...anything jump out at you?

Halie: Honestly, the, what is the stairway that you guys have in man to Oh, the incline! That because of the fact that I'm a gym junkie, okay? So I was like, okay, how can I like, maximize, like, strenuous effort with like not so long of a hike. And so I immediately went there, started doing that just to do time, like see how good of a time I could go. But then I was like, all right, this is a little too like industrial. Like I want a more natural environment and through the trees and whatnot.

And so I started Cheyenne Mountain. Started hiking along there. And that's actually where I was first introduced to you guys.

Sam: Was that on the Dixon Trail?

Halie: It was in Cheyenne Mountain. Yeah, that sounds about right. I don't know exactly which one, but that's awesome. So, that was my first time when I started working with y'all and hauling boulders. Which was great.

Sam: And for those of you listening, I had the distinct pleasure of trying to keep up with Halie while doing the pack-in on Barr Trail [Sam misspeaks here—it was actually Devil's Playground]...one of our more strenuous, probably the most strenuous, volunteer opportunity that RFI offers. I think I had maybe one coil of wire on, and I was left in the dust by Halie getting to the top with a pack, you know, significantly heavier than mine. Just absolutely left in the dust. So all that training on the incline clearly had an impact. And obviously, we're very grateful for the support of volunteers like you, especially the ones that take on our absolutely crazy opportunities like the pack-ins.

And you said you found us in Cheyenne Mountain State Park. I guess one of the questions I would have is: what about RMFI drew you to volunteer with us?

Halie: I guess honestly, because I had never really heard about a trail restoration project or group before. So, and like I said, growing up in Wisconsin, they're very much natural trails, I'll say that. And so, like, you might find yourselves with a pair of garden scissors, like trimming some trees as you're hiking down a trail.

But here I was just noticing as I was hiking these seven, eight to fourteen mile trails, I was like: "these trails are amazing and very well restored." I was like, "there's gotta be some crew or some nonprofit or volunteer base that restores all these trails." And most specifically, the fact that the rocks were so perfectly aligned and the design...I have a design eye, and so that drew me in.

And then sure enough, a supervisor of mine, she was already a volunteer with you, and she was PCSing, she was leaving here, and she wanted the assistance or the community support to stay local to the military and to have that tie or that connection.

And so that's when I was like, "oh, I'm totally taking over that." And so it was a warm handoff and I'm hoping if I do leave here at some point that I warm hand off it somewhere else.

Because I think the, the big thing is military needs to stay connected to our community. We can't just support ourselves. We're big about fitness and getting our people out and outside of their shell. And so having you all to like...say a troop comes up to me and asks, "hey, you know any volunteer opportunities?" I immediately am like, "oh, let's get you outside. Let's get you connected with RMFI." And connected to just the absolutely stunning, like, scenery that you guys have out here that you really can't pay for.

Sam: Have you noticed any sort of like...what positive impacts or what impacts at all have you noticed in the members of the military that you've worked with? Primarily...I'm assuming they're all coming from the Space Force, correct?

Halie: Space Force and Air Force.

Sam: Both Air Force and Space Force. So, when you work with members of the Space Force or Air Force, and you get them connected with us, have you noticed any like impact or change of note simply by getting out on the trails and working on them a little bit?

Halie: Yes, I have. It's almost like a twofold answer to that.

One: In the military, physical fitness is always kind of like mandatory. Okay. And so it becomes like a mundane thing of always going to the gym or always go out on the track or playing the same outdoor team sports. But we're always on base and at some point like, you need to leave that. And I was trying to figure out in my head, me being into fitness, how do I get others that aren't very much into fitness or into the outdoors...how do I tie that into their work? And so what happens in the military is they're always telling us to volunteer. And I was like, "oh, here we go." So I always picked more strenuous hikes or volunteer opportunities. And I'm like, "okay, this is how I can get people outta their shell doing something that they might not do on their own, but have everyone around us."

And so I've seen people, their confidence, like their self-confidence, just absolutely skyrocket afterwards. And it's like, thank you so much for getting me out of my bubble and doing something that I wouldn't normally have done.

And seeing that they are stronger than they think. And that's why I always love your pack-in and pack-out events. Specifically because you get to pick how much weight you think you can ruck. And then you get to the top and you're like, oh, that wasn't so bad.

So yeah, I think it's more self-confidence that has been brought on by people after they're done doing, most importantly, the strenuous hikes that you guys have.

Sam: I love the concept of like, like the, "can I," right? Like, can I, can I do that? And being willing to experiment with that and see if you can. And, and in a place where it's like...I was about to say safe to fail, but it's not exactly that. What it is, is like, because when you go out there with RMFI, obviously safety is a priority. Everything's gonna be fine. No one's gonna be doing something that's gonna hurt themselves. But the, the opportunity to just occupy that space in the growth envelope, in between the comfort zone and the danger zone. Like that's where that, that's where that growth occurs. And I'm really happy to hear that that is an opportunity that RMFI has provided, particularly to people as tough as the United States military, right?

And I, I guess I'm hearing a little bit of this already, but, you know, a lot of that work, you know...RMFI is happy to help wherever we can, right? Like that's, that's what we're here for. But a lot of the big impact work is done by the landscape that we are lucky enough to work on. Right? Like public lands are the real reason for so much of the impacts that you're just discussing right there. So, I guess I'd like to kind of pivot and ask you a little bit about what you feel the value of public lands are, either writ large or just to you specifically?

Halie: When it comes to public lands, I mean that's what was here before we came. And so immediately when you asked that a word came to mind was stewardship. And I was raised super old school. And so anything that I touch, I steward to the best of my ability. Doesn't matter if I paid for it or if I'm put into an environment, I'm gonna treat it as I would want it to be treated if it was my own property.

And so that's immediately what I thought of is that this land, especially how beautiful it is...but even if it wasn't...we need it. And for one, our mental space and mental health, especially since that's something that I'm so glad, started rooting more into our society. And this is something that is so easy for us to just go and walk the park or go and take our dog for a walk, and take our loved ones. And so I'd have to say when it comes to the public land, I think it is our responsibility to take care of [it], because it takes care of us mentally, but we can do something physically.

Especially when, most specifically, the trails that you guys restore, most of that [damage] is from foot traffic. It's from people. So why not like, help ourselves help nature?

Sam: Especially, you know, erosion is the big thing we're fighting against, right? On trails like that. And that can be caused not just by weather, but you know, by a high recreational impact. And this area, the Pikes Peak Region, Southern Colorado has a high recreational impact. There's a lot of people that come to visit. You know, some 4.5 million, at least go through Garden of the Gods alone. About a million go up Pikes Peak. And so...

Halie: I just did that.

Sam: What, sorry?

Halie: I just hiked Pikes Peak. It was my first time ever. I said I have to hike America's Mountain while I'm here because I don't know when I'm gonna leave, when the military's gonna need me elsewhere and hike in Pikes Peak. That is the most beautiful...fourteen...what was it, twelve or fourteen mile trail? I did the front side, not the back side.

Sam: So you did, you did Barr, yeah?

Halie: Yeah. And sure enough, actually, I saw your crew up there! RMFI was on the trail restoring, and I had my head down music in, and all of a sudden I saw these people and immediately I saw their shirt with your logo on. And I was like, no way! I volunteer with you guys. And so you are everywhere. I mean, the fact that I saw you halfway up a fourteener just working away. That's awesome.

Sam: And we count ourselves lucky to be able to work on all these places, right? And thankfully, we have great partnerships with, you know, the city, the state, the feds, the county...every level of land management. It's a real blessing to get to work with them and to get up on those places like Pikes Peak. So, having the opportunity to be. All over this region and doing all that work...we owe a lot of that to our partnerships with land managers, so I'm grateful for that, and grateful that you're up there and seeing our crews getting to work. That's awesome.

I guess...given that you've done so much volunteering with us and you've worked to get people to volunteer with us in your personal life and in your work life...if there's anyone who's like on the fence right now listening to this podcast, like, "yeah, I'd love to get involved...I'm just not sure when, or, you know, if I'm gonna have time or..." What would you...what advice would you give people who are on the fence about volunteering with RMFI?

Halie: You never know until you try. And I think fear holds us back. And lack of confidence in ourselves, or maybe that's not for me. And I think once we just try something new and get ourselves outside of that bubble. Like I've said, you would be so surprised as to how good you feel.

First off, that's human. For us to need the sunlight to get outdoors, you'll feel so much better. It's almost like a gym high as I call it. And if you haven't experienced that, a little plug for the gym: that gym high is real. You feel so good afterwards. Yeah. Running on a high for a whole hour and you did it.

And yeah, I would say just invite someone that maybe could help you push your limits or do something that you normally wouldn't do. So if, say, you have a coworker or friend that you know likes to go outdoors, ask 'em if you could just tag along. Because then it puts down the barrier of you trying to find a trail, or trying to, like, make sure you don't get lost. And it kind of breaks some of those barriers that you might have mentally if you just go with someone that does it on their weekends, like I do. So, I'd say yeah, just find someone that also loves the outdoors and then just tag along with them one time.

Sam: And if you're ever looking for someone who cares about the outdoors, RMFI's got your back! Give us a call. We're happy to go out with you, show you some of the work we're doing, maybe get, get a shovel in your hands as well.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with RMFI? Or anything else you'd like to share with our listeners?

Halie: I'd have to say just to you guys [RMFI], keep doing what you're doing. I know especially in the military, some jobs, some careers, they don't get all the recognition. And you're not praised from the rooftop, but you matter. And, like, people see that. And the small work that you do, whether people know it or not, like, the trails that you're restoring is like helping marriages and like helping relationships and helping people's mental health. Like, you have so many touch points that you might not always hear. And people might not always know, but just I want you guys to know that you guys make a difference out here.

Sam: Thank you for saying all of that. That's very kind of you. And, I promise to our listeners that I didn't pay Halie anything to say those things.

Thank you so much for sharing some time with us today, Halie! And there you have it. Get out on the trails if you're not. If you haven't done so yet, find someone to take you out if you are having any sort of concerns or reservations about getting out there...find someone. We're happy to be that someone. And keep an eye out on our volunteer calendar so you can have some experiences like Halie just mentioned.

Halie, thank you so much for your time.

Halie: Yeah, no problem. Thanks. Thank you.