

My passion is helping people.

More specifically, my passion is helping people become leaders. In order to lead you need to have a firm grasp of who you are. It was through a Gap Year that I was able to fully understand who I am and to truly become a leader. I think that a person's education requires real life experiences set outside of the classroom. My story is not overly exciting or unique, but it is my own. I have told this story to many people and I have found it to be fairly common. That is what makes this Gap Year message all the more important.

My name is James "Skip" Burns and I am a proud gapper. My experiences and passion for helping people become leaders inspired me to create a gap year consulting company called **GapSmart!** that helps guide people through the gap year process. Whether you got this from my website www.jskipburns.com or from a friend or family member, I hope you find what I have to say helpful. For more information you can check out www.gapsmart.com or visit my blog.

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MY STORY

“I’ve never let school interfere with my education” —Mark Twain

Way back in 2003 I was entering my senior year at the University of New Hampshire I was approaching a new phase in my life. My sixteen years of schooling were ending and soon it would be time for me to join the workforce and become a much more productive citizen. As my senior year progressed I became increasingly anxious about this next phase.

WHAT WAS I GOING TO DO?

My friends did not seem to have a clue either. More school seemed like an option no one was excited about but many were doing anyway. My friends were mostly unsure of what careers to pursue and were blindly applying to jobs. Conventional wisdom—my parents told me getting whatever job I could find was the thing to do. Start saving money, buy a house, and fill it with things.

Blindly applying for jobs and accepting whatever came my way seemed too short sighted. I wanted to do something different that would challenge me and help me figure out what I should do. Facing unappealing options I applied to grad school and started to work on masters of education so that I could teach high school social studies. Many schools offer a fifth year masters and the option was really looking attractive at the time. Soon after, however, my frustration peaked and I could not visualize myself as a teacher and I needed another, new option.

I heard about AmeriCorps and the *National Civilian Community Corps from a few friends. It involved working with a variety of government and non profit organizations doing a wide variety of service projects. This appealed to the Eagle Scout in me. Also, I saw it as an option to productively think about my life while helping other people.

Little did I know how much it would change my life. I was completely unaware that I was about to embark upon a Gap Year that would lead to adventure, prepare me for the world, and help me find life direction.

WHAT IS A GAP YEAR?

A Gap Year is time spent for self exploration and personal growth which leads to increased life direction and adventure.

The term “Gap Year” has many aliases including “interim year”; “leap year”; “post-grad year”; “service year”; and “sabbatical.” These are just some of the terms used to describe a gap year.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT IS NOT WHAT IT IS CALLED, BUT WHAT YOU GET OUT OF IT.

Here is a simple checklist of questions to ask. If you answer “yes” to most of these questions then you can consider it a gap year:

- Will it help you prepare for the next stage in your life?
- Will the time be spent doing an activity that you feel passionate about?
- Will you be helping other people?
- Will you be doing something awesome?

“Gap” means the space and time spent doing alternative activities that lead to the increased life direction. “Year” does not literally mean 365 days.

One key to the gap year experience is planning out a gap year that matches you. I chose the length or duration of my gap year. I wanted to spend about a year traveling and doing service. In 2008 I took a summer to bicycle across the country as another “gap year” with Bike & Build. What you do, where you do it, and for how long are all decided by you.

With AmeriCorps *NCCC in 2005 I started a 10-month program and during that time I lived in five states and did over 2,000 hours of service on a team of ten 18-24 year-olds. In 2006 I got promoted and signed on for another year and this time led a team. Most of 2006 I spent about four months in New Orleans and three months in Mississippi doing Hurricane Katrina recovery work.

Every day was a new challenge and test. I mastered skills learned in college and acquired many new ones. I had time to think about what I wanted to do and the whole time I was directly helping other people and my country.

The range of situations and people I became exposed to were incredibly diverse. Through these experiences my understanding of my values, goals, and myself became more defined. It could not have been a more amazing experience.

GET AHEAD OF THE CURVE

ADVENTURE, PREPARATION, & DIRECTION

When I thought about doing AmeriCorps *NCCC or Bike & Build I keyed on three main themes: adventure, preparation, and direction. After analyzing all of my options and truly reflecting on what I wanted I decided that I would only dedicate the time to doing some sort of service. I wanted to help my fellow Americans.

Let's talk about the three main benefits:

ADVENTURE

Do something awesome. Be epic. Dare to push yourself. Your gap year should stretch your comfort zone and push you. When you think about your gap year make sure it is going to leave you with some awesome memories and tales to tell your friends. You decide what you want to do and the nature of your challenges. This is a great way to live away from home, interact with people completely different from you, and see the world.

PREPARATION

The title of this ebook is "Get Ahead of the Curve- Take a Gap Year." If your gap year is not going to set you up for later success then it is going to be a waste of time. Make sure that your gap year is a time where you will be learning skills that will help advance you in life. This is the section that people often omit when planning their gap year, but it cannot be overlooked because it is such a great opportunity and critical component.

Plan three steps ahead. Determine exactly how your gap year will accelerate your plans further down the road. Your plan and direction can obviously change and will, but having that foresight from the beginning will ensure you come

out of your gap year truly prepared for what you do next.

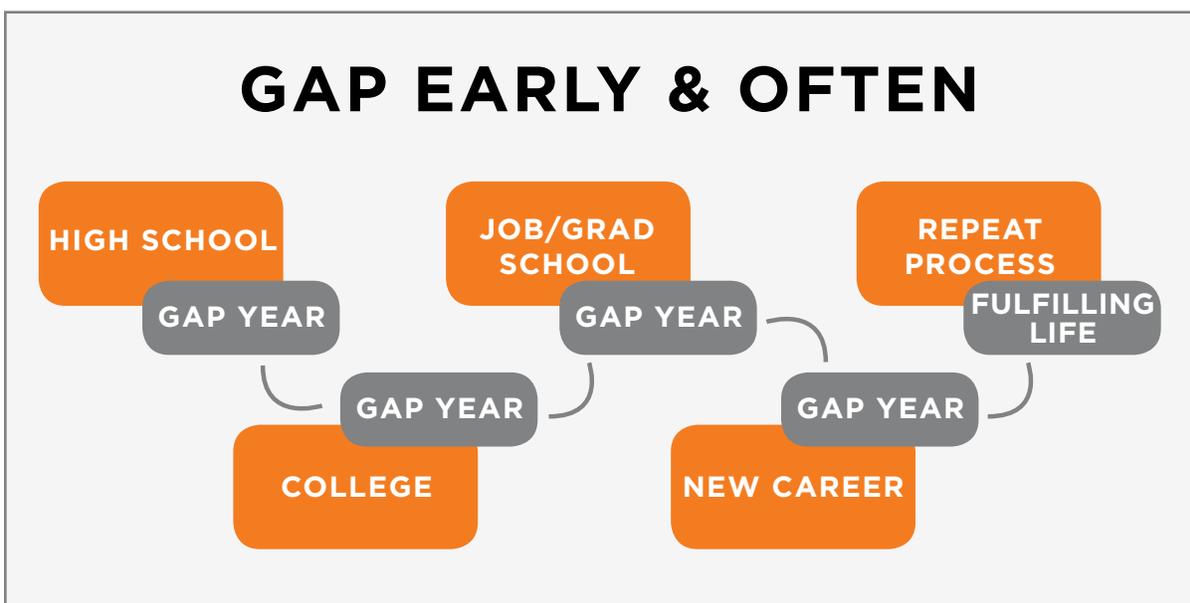
DIRECTION

Taking time to think about what you want to do with your life is invaluable. It is even better when you are being productive or serving others. All cultures have a reflection period and adulthood ceremonies. Your gap year can give you the chance to reflect on your life and choose where you want to go. The first eighteen years of a person's life is scripted and planned. A gap year can be the first time when a person gets to really make their own decisions.

After your gap year you will not know with 100% certainty what you should do with the rest of your life. After a gap year you are not 100% ready for every single challenge or obstacle set before you in life. Your thirst for adventure and doing the awesome and epic will not be quenched. Also, I would hope not. Gap Years are periods of immense growth and are really a jump start in life. A fulfilling life is one that regularly seeks adventure, challenge, and is constantly seeking more fulfilling work and activities. Growth and change are part of life and a Gap Year provides opportunity and opens doors.

WHAT I ADVOCATE IS A SERVICE GAP YEAR

“Service” means doing work for others via volunteer or community service. This can be national or international, but should be work that is altruistic. I also advocate that people take two gap years that bookend college. People can take multiple service gap years during their life. Here is a diagram illustrating when people could take gap years:



Do not take a gap year to delay, avoid, or hide from life

A post college gap year is a great way to test the skills learned in college. I advocate taking a gap year before matriculating to graduate school as well and they are a good idea when changing careers as well.

I advocate taking gap years that are thoughtful and aligned with your future goals. As you can see from the diagram, gap years precede a major step in your life: graduating high school, graduating college, joining the workforce, changing careers, etc. You take a gap year to

GET AHEAD OF THE CURVE.

In addition to adventure, preparation, and direction one thing that is gained is leadership ability. People with leadership ability are coveted employees, become entrepreneurs, and are generally more successful and satisfied with their work. A gap year forces you to develop your leadership abilities.

“Everyone can be great because everyone can serve”
—Martin Luther King

Through helping others a person is forced to examine their own life and values. This is challenging and by knowing what you value you can lead a more fulfilling life chasing what you want, not what you think you want. In AmeriCorps I realized that affordable housing was a cause that I feel strongly about. That’s why I rode my bicycle across country with Bike & Build (and I thought it would be awesome and be a great adventure) and why I sit on the Board of Directors for Athletes For Affordable Housing.

Another cool thing about doing a service gap year is the responsibility that you are given. Through service you are given the opportunity to try things above your “pay grade.” You are given responsibility well beyond your experience.

For example, while in AmeriCorps I was given the responsibility to lead a team of ten people doing rebuilding on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. Every week we would receive up to 100 volunteers from around the country and my team members had to lead them. I had to coordinate sometimes ten worksites a day and make sure they were stocked and supplied. Some of my team members were eighteen and they were leading groups of sometimes twenty volunteers. Few places would have given that sort of responsibility to people at such a young age.

SCHOOL

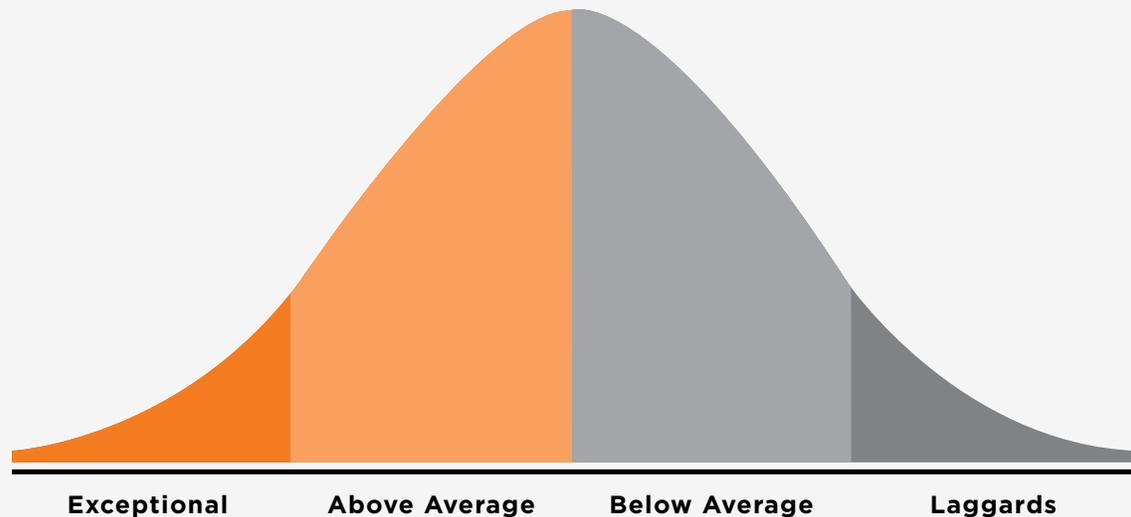
By taking a Gap Year you can make sure your college education is aligned with your career and life goals. Gap Years can also save you money and more importantly time. Through your gap year you will have a much better understanding of the degree you are pursuing.

Post-secondary education is expensive. Undergraduate college ranges from \$15,000 per year for in-state tuitions to over \$45,000 for private institutions. Graduate school varies widely in cost (from \$10,000 to over \$50,000), but only after having first spent \$60,000 to \$100,000 on undergraduate studies.

WORKPLACE CATCH-22

A Catch-22 is a situation where you need A in order to do B, but you cannot get A without first having B. For example, you cannot get hired for a job because you are under qualified or do not have enough experience and you cannot get qualified or gain experience until you have a job. This cycle essentially locks you out of not only a specific job, but potentially entire careers. This Workplace Catch-22 can be sidestepped by taking a gap year.

GET AHEAD OF THE CURVE



Where do you belong?

Service Gap Years provide opportunities to gain experience and skills that easily translate to the work place.

By committing time to service you are also proving that you will be a committed worker and you are gaining valuable references for future employers. Your Gap Year experiences will undoubtedly come up in your interviews and make you and your resume stand out from the crowd. In those interviews your gap year experience will be so unique and challenging that it oftentimes gets you the critical second interview. Additionally, when you arrive at the job you will be a more valuable employee because you are familiar with the industry and have an additional year of experience to bring to the table.

BUT, DON'T TAKE IT FROM ME...

While the Gap Year concept is endorsed by the top universities in the United States, several Presidents (Roosevelt and Civilian Conservation Corp, Eisenhower and People to People organization, Kennedy and the Peace Corps, and Clinton and AmeriCorps to name a few), the country of England (with a population of over 61 Million with an average of yearly 250,000 gappers), and thousands of Americans gapping every year there are still many doubters out there.

HERE ARE SOME REAL LIFE PEOPLE WHO HAVE TAKEN GAP YEARS AND NOT ONLY LIVED TO TELL ABOUT IT, BUT ARE STRONG SUPPORTERS AND ADVOCATES:



NATE PALMER

“Without my adventures I would not have figured out what I want to do with my life. It doesn’t have to be Bike & Build, but you have to do something. There are thousands of people out there looking for direction. You have to do something to figure it out.”

Nate Palmer is an energetic and exciting person.

He rode his bicycle across the country in 2008 and he returned in 2009 and 2010 as a trip leader. Nate graduated high school without a real

clear idea of what he wanted to do. He did not go straight to college. Seeking life direction he was drawn to Bike & Build. After each cross country ride he was able to discover his passion. Bike & Build gave him the confidence to follow those passions and helped forge him into a leader.



JUSTIN NEWTON

“Americorps was an eye opening experience that changed my life. The NCCC exposed me to diversity and challenged me to step out of my comfort zone, take the initiative, and become an assertive leader. The gap year I spent in Americorps gave me a sense of confidence and helped me create life and people skills that benefit me greatly. My time in Americorps was crucial to whom I am today and I would recommend it to anyone looking to serve their country and become outstanding citizen.”

Justin Newton is a focused and driven individual. He graduated high school lacking direction and enrolled in a community college. There he earned poor grades and quickly realized he was wasting time and money. Seeking adventure and a change he joined AmeriCorps *NCCC and moved to Denver. There he joined a Wildfire team and became closely involved with the Forest Service eventually joining a Hot Shot Crew. Due to his service and experience he has been quickly accepted to Penn State. He brings experience to his classes and tenacity to his coursework.



COREY MINCHOW

“Americorps gave me not only great work experience, ranging from summer camp counselor to building trails to helping with Hurricane Katrina, but I built several amazing relationships which presently have a lasting impression on my life.”

Corey Minchow is another successful AmeriCorps *NCCC alum. Halfway through college at the University of Nebraska he realized he was losing academic focus and was not sure why he was pursuing his degree. He took a break from school to do

AmeriCorps. Remarkably, he came back to school and still graduated with his class. His education award helped pay for his school and his renewed energy and vigor made taking extra class feasible.



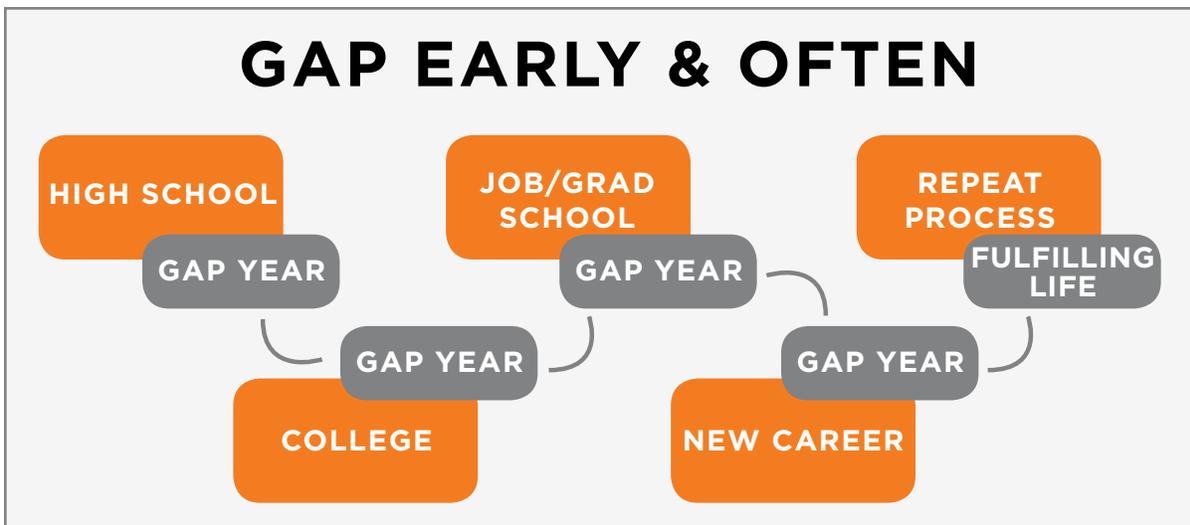
MEGAN O'BRIEN

“I think the best thing about traveling and gap year programs are that it opens your eyes to all the things you can do with your life—all the jobs you can have, places you can live, and people you can meet, and so on. Bike & Build coincided with the first realization that a 9-5 job wasn't for me, and traveling through Asia gave me the confidence to try something other than the standard job or grad school. College is supposed to teach you what career would be a good fit, but I don't think it does anymore; the structure has become limiting, the competition is more annoying than productive, and rarely do you have time to explore multiple options. Gap year programs and other travels help you figure out what you like, as well as give you the confidence to try riskier ventures.”

Megan has also done three consecutive summers with Bike & Build in '08, '09, and now '10. She took a semester long break from college to explore Southeast Asia and volunteer in Delhi. After returning to University she graduated this spring 2010.

WHEN YOU TAKE A GAP YEAR... BOOKENDING COLLEGE

When should you take your gap year? RIGHT NOW. Seriously, though it depends upon YOU. When do you want to take it?



1ST BOOKEND - YEAR AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

For a graduating high school senior there is no better preparation for college than a Gap Year. If you only take one gap year this should be it. During this time people explore potential academic paths and gain invaluable maturity before going to college. Students who take this time to gap have a better time adjusting to college life, are less academically stressed, and are more likely to graduate on time.

Additionally, these gappers have a better understanding of their classes, have real world experiences to bring to the table, and know why they are studying what they're studying.

The process of selecting how to spend a gap year itself is a large part of the learning. For the first time in their lives students are making all the decisions about what to do, where to live, etc. By taking control of mapping out their gap year the student can select situations with appropriate structure and challenges.

2ND BOOKEND - YEAR AFTER COLLEGE

Getting a college degree is a necessity in today's world. There are many more life options available for a person who holds a college degree. There are also many gap year opportunities for college graduates.

JOB EXPERIENCE

This can help you sidestep the Workplace Catch-22 and position yourself for career success. You will better identify your passions and pursue jobs that matter to you. Taking a gap year before joining the workforce is an opportunity to test out a career field, get life experience, get work experience, and do something awesome while still being free of many of life's responsibilities.

BEFORE GRAD SCHOOL

Graduate school is used to further specialize in a specific field. During a gap year you can test drive the career field and see if it is worth the dedication of time and money. By taking a gap year you can acquire skills and experience to apply to your studies. Additionally, some gap year's can help you gain admittance to more prestigious programs and institutions.

Lastly, a college graduate can bring many more skills to bear on the behalf of humanity. Organizations like Doctors Without Borders and Engineers Without Borders take specialized skills and leverage them successfully. Similarly, non-profits can benefit immensely from the technical skills that come with a college education.

This is when I gapped. I had blazed through college earning decent marks and having many extra-curricular accomplishments. As I said, at the time I did not label my time in AmeriCorps as a "gap year" but it definitely was. My AmeriCorps *NCCC team did thousands of hours of service and we could see the impact on the communities we worked in.

OTHER OPTIONS

A GAP YEAR BREAK DURING COLLEGE

Some Gappers take a time out from college. Culturally, this option is probably looked down on the most. “What, you couldn’t handle college?” In actuality, these Gappers are shrewd because they realize that they are not making the best decisions. These gap years tend to be shorter in length and involve hands on learning, research projects, and internships. This time spent can be filled with amazing networking opportunities and add a lot to senior course work and thesis.

AS AN “ADULT”

Technically, every gapper is an adult making adult decisions and living an adult life. Adults have been taking gap years for eons and often refer to them as ‘sabbaticals.’ Sabbaticals have been used to attend graduate school or conduct research. They are not common, but they are also not rare.

However, as you get older there are increasing responsibilities and obligations that make taking a gap year more difficult. Not impossible, just a bit more difficult. The obligations and responsibilities just means that you have to do more planning and thinking outside of the box.

Many people take a gap year between changing careers and it has become much more popular in recent years due to the economy.

Again, do not gap to avoid life but rather to accelerate your plans.

FEAR & CHALLENGE

The two most formidable obstacles gappers face are fear and perceived difficulty. These are the two reasons people do not try things. Either it looks difficult or it is scary. These two emotions or reactions can be seen as the basis for almost every action taken or avoided.

Everyone, myself included, prefers to take the path of least resistance that nets the greatest benefit. There are many obstacles that people face in life. Regardless of the challenge or task these obstacles can be boiled down to fear and challenge. And if something seems dangerous, scary, or extremely difficult the reaction is, I am not going to do that.

Gap Years provide chances to face down fears and to practice overcoming challenges. These are two skills that are essential to being successful in life.

FEAR

If something looks scary you are less likely to try it. This is true for all people. The fears of moving away from friends and home, living in a new place, living with a roommate, and being exposed to new ideas can be paralyzing. Much of that first year in college is filled with dealing with these issues. Many common college fears are similar to gap year fears. By taking that gap year an incoming freshman is better equipped to handle these and other pressures.

There are plenty of gap year programs that are academically rigorous. Structure and schedule vary widely based on the gap year program. Some are very structured and some have little structure. The fear is not knowing what you will be doing. By spending productive time on your own trying new things and dealing with life choices and challenges these fears can be put to bed.

High school seniors are excited and eager about college because generally, it has been talked about their entire lives and has been the sole focus of their high school experience. This option is filled with fear but is easier to handle because their peers are all about to embark on the same journey. There is safety in numbers. Students are in many cases pushed into college by their well-meaning parents. Through encouragement a high school senior can be guided into taking a productive gap year and then having a more fulfilling college experience.

CHALLENGE

Gap Years are meant to be filled with challenge and tests. The purpose is to push yourself. The challenge that holds people at bay is the perceived difficulty of taking a gap year. There is less information available about gap year programs than college programs, and so it appears to be more difficult to apply. This is not true. There are so many programs out there that there is definitely an option for everyone.

It looks hard getting started on the process of picking a gap year program. Finding programs can be very difficult. Information is sparse and finding first hand accounts can be rare.

Applying to college is relatively easy in comparison. Some colleges just need you to sign up and others have rigorous application processes. Every public high school has multiple counselors focused on facilitating students applying to college.

Most gap year programs have a very similar application to college. Just fill out the application, write an essay, get a recommendation and send it in is all most require. But, you do not have to take the SATs or ACTs or any test. Many programs do not require essays or recommendations and just ask that you sign up online.

Granted, many programs are in high demand and reject some applicants, but so do prestigious colleges. After a gap year your college application will look stronger.

Finding my gap year was not an easy task. At the time there was little information available about AmeriCorps. It was hard to find first hand accounts, but luckily I knew a few people who were doing it. I understand that a person can get intimidated about taking a gap year. The AmeriCorps Pledge has a line that I quote often “in the face of adversity I will persevere.” Finding a program is easier than it looks and there is program out there for everyone.

ACTIONABLE ITEMS— WHAT YOU CAN DO RIGHT NOW

Think, Talk, & Act

START THINKING

Start thinking about what you will do during your gap year. Ask yourself these questions: what do I want to accomplish in my life? How can a gap year fit into my life? How can a gap year help me accomplish my goals? What will I get out of my gap year?

These are a lot of questions, but take some time to really think about this endeavor. You must be bold when planning and doing a gap year. You cannot let fear hold you back, so the earlier you start thinking about it the better.

Do some journaling and think about the goals you have for your life. Not the goals of your friends, neighbors, or family but the goals that you have for yourself.

GET TALKING

At some point you will have to tell people about your gap year plans. Some people will be excited about your plans, but most will have little reaction or will even try to dissuade you. Typically, the ones closest to you will be the loudest opponents.

Don't let that stop or discourage you. Stick to your dreams and explain why you taking a gap year and what you will get out of it. They will eventually come around once they understand this is important to you.

GET GOING AND DOING

The bottom line is stop daydreaming and imagining and make it happen.

Now that you have thought about it and talked about it you need to start taking action. I recommend drawing a timeline of your life for the next ten or twenty years. By mapping out your life you can see where and how gap years can be put in. At first start broad and see how it could fit into your life. If some of your goals are time contingent then you should probably take care of those first.

The most important factor in planning is making sure that the activity focus is a passion.

Make sure that what you are going to be spending your time fires you up and gets you excited.

While you map out the where and when make sure that you picture yourself doing something epic. Tie in adventure as frequently as possible. If the gap year you take is boring you have only yourself to blame.

Until you step onto that plane, train, or car people close to you offer you excuses for quitting. They mean well and do not want you to fail, they are just scared and nervous. During this time tell your friends and family your plans and make sure you express the why you are doing it. If you think this is a good idea and is something you want to do, your friends and family should support you (provided your activity focus is legal which I HIGHLY recommend.). But, take it from me, sometimes people will not agree with your plan or vision.

DO IT ANYWAY.

NOW FOR THE WRAP UP

In hindsight, I would have benefited from doing AmeriCorps before college. But, I do not regret going straight to college after high school. It all works out eventually. When I first proposed doing something out of the ordinary after college like AmeriCorps I was met with resistance. Many family members loudly denounced the decision. They were also not pleased when I did a second term of service and marveled at my desire to bike across the country. Luckily, I had the self confidence to do these things and they eventually came around. I see too many of my peers hold back and not fully live the life they want due to fear.

I hope you have the courage to take a gap year. The world needs inspired, motivated, creative people to lead it, and people who are able to handle numerous challenges and a dynamic world economy. By taking a gap year a person is making a conscious decision to better themselves and the world. We need more people like that.

Lastly, please, share the gap year concept with those close to you. Spread the word and help this movement gain momentum.

I would like to thank my family and friends for supporting me (Nancy for proofreading, Jim for listening, Nick for exposing flaws, and Lisa for being a sound board). A special shout out goes to my friend Angela for editing and making this ebook look good.

For more information visit, **www.gapsmart.com**. Thanks for reading and please contact me if you have any questions, comments, or just want to say hi. **www.jskipburns.com**.